NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANNON HALE



The Books of Bayern

The Complete Series

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For Dean

Best Friend, Companion & Squeeter Keeper
You are Home

and

For Mom and Dad

Happy days to you
Love, Shannon

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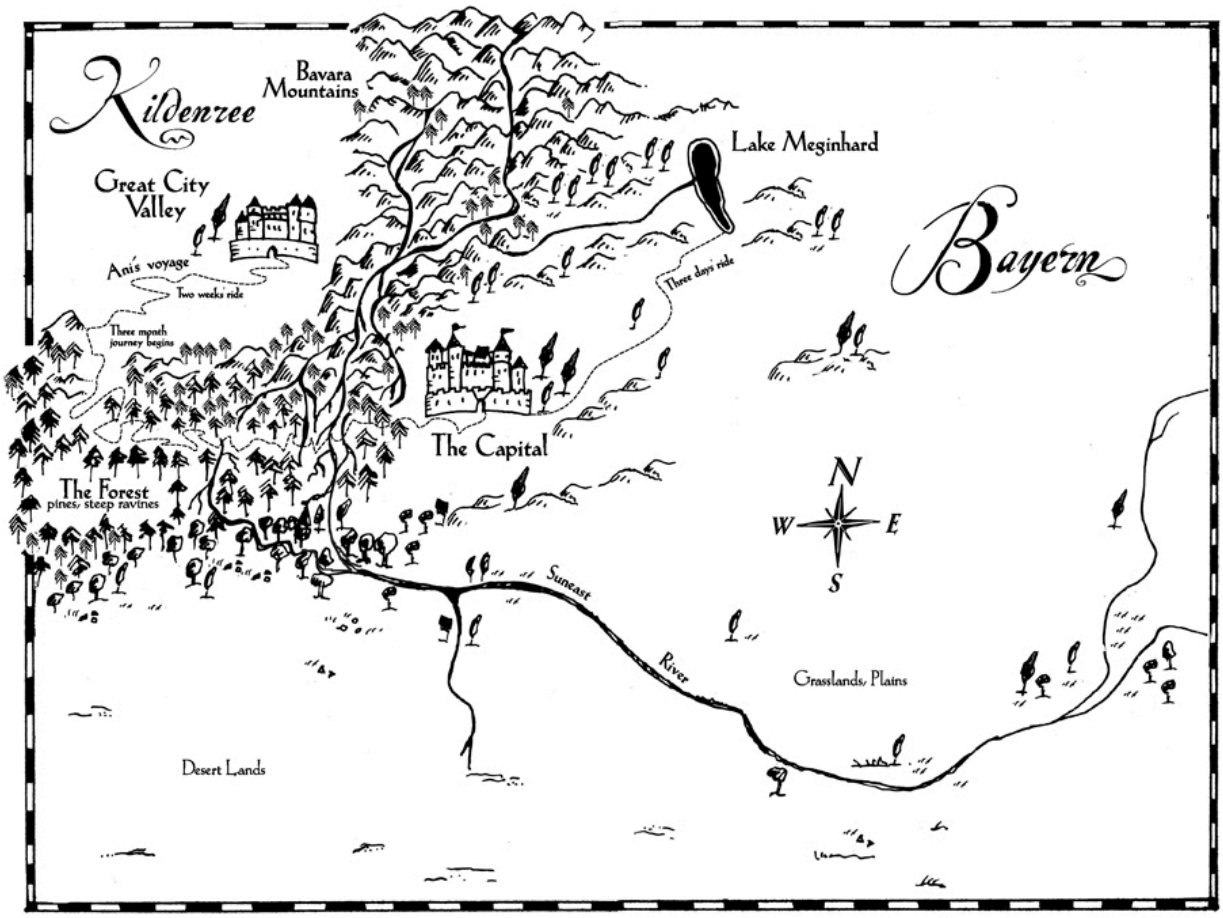
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Part One



Crown Princess

Chapter 1

She was born Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, Crown Princess of Kildenree, and she did not open her eyes for three days.

The pacing queen directed ministers and physicians to the crib. They listened to her breathing and her hummingbird heart, felt her fierce grip and her tiny fingers soft as salamander skin. All was sound. But her eyes did not open.

For three days the grave-faced attendants came and went. They prodded her, lifted her lids, slipped thick yellow syrups down her throat.

"You are a princess," the queen whispered to her ear. "Open your eyes."

The baby cooed in her sleep.

When the third day had worn away to the lake blue of evening, a hand parted the nursery curtains. All was still for the night. The queen dozed on the bed. The baby in her crib dreamed of milk, her round, perfect lips nursing in sleep. A woman in a fern green robe pulled aside the curtains and tiptoed across the carpets. She slid her callused hands under the infant's back and head, held her up, and grinned.

"Did you call me out of my house to come and tell you stories?" she said. "I will, my fat one, if you will listen."

The queen awoke to the sounds of the rocking chair creaking and a voice singing about magpies and pigeons. She stood up, ready to call to the guards, then saw that it was her own sister who sang to the baby, and that the baby was looking back at her aunt with wide eyes.

It was the aunt who shortened the crown princess's name to Ani.

On clear days she took Ani to the north edge of the palace grounds where no wall had been built. That far out, the garden was allowed to stray out of its ordered beds and rows and merge with the occasional copse of ash and pine. The aunt felt easier there, and she held her niece's small hand and named all she saw.

"You see the bird on the tallest branch there, the one with a yellow breast? She's migrating farther north now that the weather is warmer. The bluewing there is looking for twigs and says he has found himself a picky mate."

Ani began to speak sentences at one year. The aunt knew too well how Kildenreans disliked anything outside the common, and she tried to keep Ani's progress hidden. But the household staff noted it, and rumors began that perhaps the queer green-clad nurse-mary possessed unnatural methods of awakening a child's words.

The queen was uncomfortable with the talk and careful never to call the new nurse-mary "sister." But the king was too stubborn to worry much. "Why shouldn't she be a quick learner? She is our daughter, of pure of blood as are ever born in this world, and has every right to speak before her time."

But the king saw little of his firstborn, and the queen even less. Calib-Loncris was born, the first son, and then Napralina-Victery, who from birth so resembled her mother that the nurse-marys were inclined to curtsy to the crib. With the parents' attention parted, the aunt became Ani's constant companion.

In cold weather or spring rain, the aunt sat on the nursery floor and told Ani stories of fantastic and faraway things: a land where mares pawed gold nuggets from the earth and chewed them in order to breathe out music; a baker who baked birds from dough and sent them out the window in search of a treasured pot of apricot preserves; a mother who loved her baby so fiercely, she put him in a tight locket around her neck so that he might never grow up. The aunt sang songs again and again until Ani learned the words, her toddler's voice as dry and delicate as a sparrow's call.

A day in early summer when Ani was five, the two companions sat in an aspen's dappled shade on the edge of the garden swan pond. Ani loved the birds that were as big as she and begged them to eat bread out of her hands. When the bread was all gone, they shrugged their wings and skronked at her.

"What did they say?"

"They wanted to know," said the aunt, "was there more bread for the eating or should they go back to the pond."

Ani looked at the nearest swan straight in one eye. "No more bread. You may go."

The swan shrugged his wings again.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't think he speaks your language, duckling." The aunt turned her profile and one eye to the swan and made a sound like the swan spoke, not

quite a honk and almost a whine. The swan padded back to the pond.

Ani watched with a solemn expression and after a moment repeated the sounds she had heard. “Was that right?”

“Perfect,” said the aunt. “Say that again.”

She repeated the noise and smiled. The aunt looked at her thoughtfully, the corners of her mouth tight with suppressed excitement.

“Does that make you happy?” asked the aunt.

“Yes,” said Ani with little-girl certainty.

The aunt nodded and took Ani into her lap to tell her a story about beginnings. Ani leaned her head against her aunt’s chest and listened to both the story and the sound of the story.

“The Creator spoke the first word, and all that lived on the earth awoke and stretched and opened their mouths and minds to say the word. Through many patterns of stars, they all spoke to one another, the wind to the hawk, the snail to the stone, the frog to the reeds. But after many turnings and many deaths, the languages were forgotten. Yet the sun still moves up and down, and the stars still shift in the sky, and as long as there are movement and harmony, there are words.”

Ani leaned her head back and, squinting, tried to look at the sun. She was young and had not yet learned that things like seeing the sun were impossible.

“Some people are born with the first word of a language resting on their tongue, though it may take some time before they can taste it. There are three kinds, three gifts. Did you know your mother has the first? The gift of people-speaking. Many rulers do. You see? And people listen to them, and believe them, and love them. I remember as children it was difficult to argue with your mother—her words confused me, and our parents always believed her over me. That can be the power of people-speaking.

“The first gift is the only reason this little land was not taken over by other kingdoms long ago. Rulers like your mother have talked themselves out of war for centuries. It can be powerful and good, and it can also be dangerous. I, unfortunately, wasn’t born knowing people-speaking.” The aunt laughed, and the surface of her eyes gleamed with memory.

“Do I have it, Aunt?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Perhaps not. But there are other gifts. The second is the gift of animal-speaking. I’ve met a few who are able to learn animal languages, but like me, those people feel more comfortable near the

mountains, among the trees and places where animals are not in cages. It's not always a pleasant life, sparrow. Others are suspicious of those who can speak with wild things. Once there were many of us in Kildenree, I believe, but now, so few remember.

"The third is lost or rare. I've never known one with the gift of nature-speaking, though there are tales that insist it once was. I strain my ears and my eyes and my insides"—she tapped her temple lightly—"but I don't know the tongue of fire or wind or tree. But someday, I think, someone will discover how to hear it again."

The aunt sighed and smoothed her niece's yellow hair. "Not many know the story of the three gifts, Ani. You must remember it. It's important to know stories. I felt the earth shift to make a place for you when you were born, and I came to tell you stories while you are young. And like me, you were born with a word on your tongue. I don't know what word it was. You will grow older and discover it one day without my help."

"Maybe fire or wind or tree?" said Ani.

"Maybe," said the aunt. "I don't know those tongues. I can't help you discover them."

Ani patted her aunt's cheek as though she were the elder of the two. "But you can teach me to speak with the swans."

They returned each day to the pond. When no gardener worked within sight or courtier walked near, Ani practiced the sounds she heard.

"They don't have such a complicated world as we do and need so few words," said the aunt. "Did you hear? The tall one there was greeting the one with the tail feathers missing. They are brothers. If they were sisters, the sound would go up at the end."

Ani listened. "I just heard it. Like this." She mimicked the greeting, drawing up the last sound slightly.

"Very good," said the aunt. "You know, most people wouldn't notice that. You can hear the tiny differences and imitate them—that's your talent. But it takes work, too. You have to learn what it all means, like studying any foreign language. And it's not just sounds. Watch how that one there bobs her head and moves her tail. And holds still. It all means something."

On walks, the aunt called down the little birds from ash and beech perches, but they were anxious, busy things and would not stay long from their trees. Ani learned some of what the chickens in their coops and pigeons on their ledges complained and cooed to one another. They visited

the small gray falcons and gold hawks when the hunt-master was out, and the wide-eyed owls in the barn rafters.

On one walk back from their wild garden, they passed the corrals. The warm, earthy smell drew Ani close, and she stood on a fence rail and watched the stable-master ride a graceful gray. She pointed.

"I want to speak to that one. The horse."

"What a smart girl to think to ask." She leaned behind Ani, her cheek pressed against her niece's, and watched the animal run. "I have tried to speak to so many animals, Ani. The wild ones like wolves and deer will not stay still to listen or be listened to. Lizards, toads, rats, and all the little animals—I think perhaps their language is too simple for us bigger animals to understand. The domestic creatures like dogs, cows, and cats are sleepy in their comfort and used to communicating with people on our own terms. And birds, as you have seen, are perfect for speech. Always wild and yet always listening, and the larger ones especially, for they speak more slowly.

"But the horse, ah, Ani, I will tell you a story. Several years ago, I helped a friend with his foaling mare, and the little colt fell into my arms. I heard him, just after he tumbled out, emit a mournful little sound, something like 'Yulee.' His name. Horses are born with their own name on their tongue, you see? I repeated it back to him, and he heard me, and ever since he can hear me and I can hear him. It's a horse's way to give you the key to their speech once and never repeat it. I've tried the same with a calf and a litter of kittens and a kid-goat, but only the colt has responded. What do you think of that?"

"I would like a horse friend," said Ani. "Very much." Perhaps a horse would not hit her with play swords, like her little brother, or treat her like a glass vase and then whisper behind her back, like the other palace children.

The aunt shook her head. "You're too young. Sometime, some year, when you're older and you can go to the stables and your mother will not question why. For now, you must listen to your winged friends."

Ani was eager to learn the voice of every bird that nested on the palace grounds, but the swan pond drew her return day after day. She loved to watch them swim so slowly that the water hardly rippled and watch every silent, mild movement shimmer into meaning. Soon her throat and tongue could make nearly all the sounds of the swans, and she trumpeted gleefully.

"Hush a moment, Ani," said the aunt.

The key-mistress and her daughter, Selia, passed by the pond on the walk to the gardens. The aunt waved, and the key-mistress nodded. Her little girl was pretty and poised, with hair already to her waist. She walked with hands clasped in front and eyes centered on the path ahead. As a little girl she had been prone to violent tantrums, notorious for turning all shades of pink and purple and for kicking the floor like a landed fish. But she was seven now and prim as a court lady.

"Hello, Crown Princess," said Selia. "We are going to the gardens. Come for tea sometime."

"Um, yes, thank you." Ani was not used to being addressed by other children, and besides, this strange little girl had always made her feel uneasy—at once willing to do whatever Selia asked and eager to escape her notice. The same way, in fact, that she felt around her mother. The aunt raised one eyebrow in the blue shadow of her hat and watched the pair stroll away.

"That one has the gift of people-speaking," she said. "It can be powerful. Mark me and watch her."

Ani watched the serious little girl stroll away and tried to remember. *People-speaking. That one has*.

That year, when the trees burned the fire of late summer into their leaves and the ground mist was a ghost of the river, long and wet and cold, the aunt looked from her window to the walls around her and imagined another winter inside them. She began to see the world as a bird sees bars, and she scratched her arms beneath her sleeves.

The aunt took Ani to the shore of the swan pond where the lazy-armed trees dipped themselves into their own reflections and the aspens' hard little leaves shook in the wind with a noise like snapping fingers. The aunt pointed north, where few people lived and trees grew thick and prickly green all year, and where the girl could not follow.

"I'm going home," she said. She kissed Ani's forehead, but her eyes did not leave the purple horizon. "Don't forget all you have learned. If your mother discovers what I have taught you, she will take it away. I know her. The only thing she has ever wanted is shiny and fits around her brow. Still, you are better off with her, gosling. I would not wish my solitude on you. Stay and learn to be happy."

The princess sat on a stone, rested her arm on the back of a swan, and thought how her chest felt like a gutted walnut shell, and wondered if that

sensation might last forever. She watched her aunt walk away, disappearing into a tiny spot of green that the eye tricked into a shadow of a rock a long way in the distance.



The next morning, Ani was dismayed to see she had been given a new companion, a weak-hearted nurse-mary with skin like sour milk. They were not to go to the pond because "the young crown princess might fall in and drown, with her face bloated and purple like a sauced plum, would you like that?"

Despite her aunt's cautions, Ani was certain if she explained to the nurse-mary that she just wanted to speak with the swans, then it would be all right. When the woman's eyes widened, Ani mistook it for eagerness.

"I can understand what they say," Ani said. "I'll teach you how, too, if you like."

The nurse-mary rose from the garden bench, gasping, and tossed bits of grass in the air before her to shake loose the evil.

"You'll curse yourself. People don't speak to animals, and it's not such a clever game to say you do."

Ani overheard the nurse-mary report to the queen in hushed, hurried tones that made Ani feel she had done something unspeakably bad. Thereafter, outings were limited to the gardens and the nursery porch. Her mother looked at her now with a distant, disapproving frown, and Ani resolved to keep to herself until her aunt would return and carry her off into the freedom of the mountains. Long hours she spent watching the purple horizon, willing her aunt to walk back out of it with welcoming arms.

She missed the sound of bird words, and the feeling that came, like a cricket leaping inside her chest, when she heard and understood. In her world of cold marble floors and aged tutors and whispering children, only the animal-speaking felt like her own thing and the pond her own place. Once or twice when the nurse-mary was bedded with a head cold, Ani escaped the nursery porch and ran to practice with the swans. As she approached, two gardeners stepped between her and the pond.

"Can't come around here, Crown Princess," said the hard-skinned man. "Dangerous."

When she tried to slip into the mews to converse with the hawks, the hunt-master carefully escorted her out with a firm grip on her collar.

“Sorry, Crown Princess,” he said. “The queen was clear that you were not to play near my birds.”

She tried many times in the two years she waited for her aunt’s return, and each time someone stopped her. It felt like dreams when she ran but could not move. Sometimes in secret, Ani lay on her belly and tried to mimic her puppy Lindy’s whines and growls.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Can you understand me, Lindy?”

The nurse-mary must have overheard, for when Ani returned from her tutor’s apartment one afternoon, the puppy was gone and her mother stood in the center of the nursery, waiting.

“He is in the kennels now,” said the queen. “I think it best that you no longer keep pets.”

“I want Lindy back.” Ani was hurt and angry, and she spoke louder than she ever had before. “You give him back.”

The queen slapped Ani’s mouth.

“That tone is unacceptable. This fantasy has gone unchecked for too long. If I had known that woman was teaching you those mad ideas she had when we were children, I would have sent her running from this city without her pack. It is time you learn your place, Crown Princess. You will be the next queen, and your people will not trust a queen who makes up stories and seems to talk to wild beasts.”

Ani did not answer. She was holding her stinging mouth and staring at the purple horizon.

The queen turned to go, then paused before the door. “I came to tell you. We received word today that your aunt passed away this winter. I am sorry if this hurts you.”

Ani watched her mother’s back walk away and felt her seven-year-old world tumble like a hatchling from a tree.

That evening her parents held a ball. The nurse-marys stood in the nursery doorway and smiled toward the music that came down the corridor like a sigh. The wet nurse held the new princess, Susena-Ofelienna, to her breast and spoke of skirts and slippers. A young, pretty nurse-mary held Napralina-Victery to her shoulder and whispered about men and secret things.

Every word they spoke seemed to empty Ani more, like buckets dipped into a shallow well. She pretended great interest in building a city of many towers with her pale wood bricks, and when the nurse-marys wandered into the corridor for a closer look, Ani slipped out the nursery porch to run away.

The light that came from behind pushed her shadow forward, a very thin giantess stretching across the lawn, her head pointing to the pond. She ran on the damp night grass and felt the breeze go right through her nightgown. It was early spring and still cold at night.

She reached the pond and looked back to where the pink marble ballroom gazed brilliantly out at the night, the glass and walls trapping the music in. The people inside looked beautiful, graceful, and completely at ease in their place. It helped her resolve to realize that she was nothing like them. But when she turned her back to the lights, she saw that the night was so dark, the stables did not exist. She could not see the stars. The world felt as high as the depthless night sky and deeper than she could know. She understood, suddenly and keenly, that she was too small to run away, and she sat on the damp ground and cried.

The water lipped the pond's sandy side. The swans slept, blue and silver in the night. One swan roused at Ani's sob and greeted her, then nested in the sand near her feet. *I am tired*, Ani told her, *and lost from my herd*. The swan words she spoke sounded to her human ears like the mournful wail of a child. *Sleep here*, was the bird's simple reply. Ani lay down and, putting one arm over her face as though it were a wing, tried to shut out the world where she did not belong.

She awoke when two strong hands lifted her.

"Crown Princess, are you all right?"

She wondered why the world was so black, then realized her eyes were still closed. Her lids seemed too thick to open. She let her head fall against the man's shoulder and smelled the strong goat milk soap of his clothing. He was carrying her away.

"Who are you?"

"Talone, Watcher of the East Gate. You were asleep with the swans and would not rouse."

Ani creaked open one eyelid and saw that the sky above the mountains was eggshell pale. She looked at the man and was about to ask a question when she shuddered again, from her bones to her skin.

"Are you hurt, Crown Princess?"

“I’m cold.”

He pulled his cloak off his shoulders and wrapped it around her, and the warmth lured her back into a fevered sleep.

It was three weeks before she was well enough that the lines on the physicians’ faces relaxed into wrinkles and the youngest nurse-mary did not exclaim whenever Ani opened her eyes. Long after the fever, her name was often replaced with “that delicate child.” She was kept indoors. She was never alone. She breakfasted in bed and supped on a couch and never laced her own boot. The incident with the swans was mentioned only in secret tones.

“We almost lost a future queen.”

“And not just to death, but to wildness.”

“What shall we do with her?” said the nursery-mistress.

The queen looked down at Ani, who lay sleepily awake, her eyes half-open, her ears pricked for the judgment that would fall from her mother’s powerful mouth onto her head. Somehow by getting sick, Ani felt she had badly betrayed this woman, and remorse pricked at her with the fever chills. The queen was like some terribly beautiful bird whose language she did not yet understand, and she felt her thin body fill with the desire to understand, and to please.

The queen squinted, briefly creating spider leg–thin lines around her eyes. She laid a cool hand on Ani’s forehead. The gesture was almost motherly.

“Keep her resting,” said the queen, “and away from birds.”

Chapter 2

Ani set down the cold remains of her peppermint tea and hoped she was still smiling. The view from the window tugged at her attention, teasing her with indistinct movements in the direction of the stables, brown spots that might have been horses running. But she kept her eyes firmly on the brown freckle on the key-mistress's upper right cheek.

"Let me express again, Crown Princess, how honored we are that you accepted our invitation this afternoon. I hope the meal was to your liking."

"Yes, thank you," said Ani.

"I have begged my daughter for some months to invite you to our apartments. You have grown as tall as your mother, save her, though not quite as pretty, and I wonder, since you seem to always be quite busy, if you have yet learned what duties are most important to your station?"

"Um, thank you, yes." Ani winced. The key-mistress had been waiting months for this afternoon because Ani had taken great pains to escape it. This kind of thing was, apparently, supposed to be social and relaxing. But like every visit and tea and party Ani attended, she was aware that others expected the crown princess to act, speak, and think as queenly as her mother, a feat that for her, Ani was certain, was as likely as her blowing down the wind. "Yes," she said again, and winced again, conscious of just how dim she sounded.

Silence hovered between them like a tired moth. Clearly she was expected to say something else, but panic at having to speak stole thoughts from her head. She glanced at Selia, but her lady-in-waiting's serene demeanor gave no clues as to how to respond. Selia often reminded Ani of a cat, seemingly bored yet taking everything in with her lazy gaze. At age eighteen, Selia was two years Ani's senior, four fingers shorter, and her long hair was one pale shade darker than Ani's yellow. In appearance, they were almost as alike as sisters.

Her eyes lingered a moment on Selia, and she found herself thinking, *She would be better at playing princess than I am*. The thought stung. Ani wanted so badly to do it right, to be regal and clever and powerful. But too often her only truly happy moments were the bursts of freedom, stolen afternoons on her horse's back, brief, breathtaking rides past the stables to

where the gardens turned wild, her lungs stinging with the cold, her muscles trembling with the hard ride. It had been nearly ten years since she had last thought of running away, staring out at the too big night from the shores of the swan pond. She would never try again. She was the crown princess, and she was determined to one day make a decent queen.

The key-mistress cleared her throat, and Ani looked back, thankful her hostess had taken it upon herself to crack the silence. "I hope I don't show presumption to say that you have been more than mistress to my Selia since the queen your mother chose her to be the first—and might I dare to say, most honored—member of your retinue, but you have also been her friend."

"Yes." Ani readjusted her hands in her lap and fought for something new to say. She only smiled again and said, "Thank you."

"Crown Princess, you look as though you wish to ask for something," said Selia. Ani turned to her gratefully and nodded. Selia lifted the pot. "More tea?"

"Oh, yes, um, thank you."

Selia filled her cup, and the key-mistress looked down at her own, mumbling, "Tea, yes."

"Actually," said Ani, and her heart pounded at having to speak out, "actually, if you do not mind, my father and I are to go riding today, and so, you see, I had best go soon."

"Oh." The key-mistress glanced at her daughter and gave one shake of her head.

Selia touched Ani's hand. "Crown Princess, Mother has been looking forward to this visit for a fortnight."

At once Ani felt Selia's words burn her cheeks red, and she looked down. *I've fouled up again*, thought Ani. "I'm sorry." She sipped her tea. It was too hot, and she felt her heart beat in her burned tongue.

"Riding," said the key-mistress.

"Yes, Mother, I told you. She finds time to ride almost every day."

"Yes, rides a stallion, I believe. Do you not think, Crown Princess, that it is inappropriate for a princess to ride a stallion? Should you not ride a nice, gentle mare or gelding? Are you not afraid that you will break your crown?" The key-mistress turned to her daughter. "That was a pun, dear. Break your crown."

Selia laughed her high, lovely laugh.

Something about that exchange burned Ani's pride like her tongue. She set down her cup and stammered an awkward reply.

"Yes, well, I do ride a stallion, and if my father, the king, thinks it is inappropriate, he will tell me so. At any rate, thank you for the tea and the dinner. I must go. I'm sorry. Thank you."

She stood up. Selia looked up at her and blinked, unaccustomed, it seemed, to even that much of an outburst from her mistress. It took the key-mistress a few moments to refurbish herself with words.

"Yes, yes, off you go, Crown Princess. For the best. It is, you know, inappropriate to keep the king waiting."

They exited the key-mistress's apartments and walked briskly down the corridor. Selia's heels made her nearly as tall as Ani, and they clicked on the tile floor like a cat's claws grown unchecked.

"Are you all right?" said Selia.

Ani let out a breath and laughed a little. "I don't know why I let myself panic like that."

"I know. But I thought it would be good for you to practice."

"You are right, Selia, I know you are. I hate the way I get so muddled and say everything wrong and take everything wrong."

"And as you are to be queen one day, you have to learn now how to converse pleasantly with people you don't care about."

"Oh, it's not that I don't care about her, or anyone else." Ani thought perhaps it was that she cared too much. She was constantly worried about what others thought of her, and how every word she spoke could condemn her further. Ani thought how to explain that to Selia and decided that she could not. Selia's ease with strangers and friends alike made Ani sure she would not understand. Besides, Ani was eager to shrug off the unpleasant feelings of another failure.

She felt herself relax a little when they passed under an arch and outside. It was an afternoon in winter, the sun bright and the air like early morning, new and wet with coming snow. When they approached the stables, Selia curtsied and walked to the gardens as she often did when Ani went riding. The lady-in-waiting was allergic to horses. Or so she said. Once, from a distance, Ani had witnessed Selia willingly entering a stable holding hands with an unknown man. But Ani had refused to inquire. She, too, had her secrets.

Ani entered the first stable. The familiar smells of warm bodies and clean hay greeted her like a friendly touch. She made her way past bowing grooms to the stall she knew best.

Falada, said Ani.

A white horse raised his head and made no audible sound.

The first time Ani had spoken that name, she had been eleven. The prime minister of Bayern, the kingdom on the other side of the mountains, had been visiting at the time, and all wary-eyed parties were so busy entertaining road-weary dignitaries that Ani had been able to steal away to the stables a few times to bring to pass a childhood wish. So it was that Ani was by the stable-master's side when an overdue mare foaled her white, long-legged colt. Ani had helped break open the birthing sac and cleared the fluids from his nostrils. She had steadied his middle as he first tried to stand, balancing his long body on stick legs and staring at the lighted world with oversize eyes. She had listened when he spoke his name, that word that had lain on his tongue while he still slept in the womb. And when she repeated it, he had heard her. After this initial connection, it was not long before she discovered they could speak to each other without other people hearing a sound.

And Ani was grateful for that. She remembered how it had taken all her father's power just to convince the queen that Ani should be allowed to keep her horse. Certainly he would have been sent off to the provinces the moment the queen suspected Ani and Falada of having such a bond.

Falada, I am late. Tirean is gone from her stall. My father must already be riding.

The boy did not give me enough oats, said Falada.

His voice entered her mind as naturally as her own thoughts, but as distinct as the smell of citrus. Ani smiled, with sincerity now, and worked off the glumness of the lunch visit by attacking his white hide with quick brush strokes. *I wonder sometimes how much is enough.*

You give me enough.

Because I love you too much and I cannot say no. But I will for now because my father is waiting.

She saddled him, and he teased her by holding his breath when she tightened the girth. *What, you want me and the saddle to fall off your back at the first fence?* And she led him with a loose rein out of the stable and into the bright afternoon. A thin, stiff layer of snow crunched beneath their

feet and reflected hard sunlight into their eyes. Ani squinted into the brilliant distance where her father rode his black mare, Tirean. He waved and rode up. He was a tall, slender man with hair so pale, Ani could not separate the natural from the graying hairs in his beard unless she was close enough to touch.

"You are late," he said.

"I was being a crown princess," said Ani.

He dismounted and gave Falada a friendly pat. "Off playing pins and balls with your siblings, no doubt. I heard them in the west hall."

"Come now, Father, you know the queen would never permit such nonsense from me. 'Anidori, a crown princess, like a queen, can succeed only by staying apart. Separation, elevation, delegation.'"

The king grimaced. He had long ago ceased to argue such points with his wife. "Tell me, then, what your business was this morning—separating, elevating, or delegating?" He clapped his hands twice as though it were a song.

"Oh, all three. I breakfasted alone while sketching a map of Kildenree from memory for my tutor, I was surrounded by my 'lessers' all morning as I received mendicants and courtiers, and then I solved all their problems by assigning them to other people. Oh, and a social visit with Selia's mother to end it all with a flourish." She nodded and curtsied.

"That is wonderful, Anidori," he said with all the force of a proud father. "And how did you do?"

"Fine." In truth it had been, from dawn until then, a horrible day full of trips, stutters, and stupidity. She felt her chin tremble a little and covered it with a hand. His assurance that she was wonderful was a stab in the soreness of her insecurity. He more than anyone knew how she tried to be what her mother was, and how often she failed. It was he who in earlier years had held her weeping at his chest and told her that she was good enough, that she was his best girl. She had not sought his comfort in years, trying as she was to grow up, to be independent and queenly enough not to hurt, but she longed for his succor now.

"Or, you know, well enough." Her voice cracked a little, and she turned away to mount Falada. But he caught her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace. The little girl in her won out, and she sobbed lightly against his chest.

"There, easy now," he said as though calming an anxious horse.

“I was terrible, Father. I’m so worried that I will say all the wrong things and that they think I’m a dim, sickly, bird-speaking girl that I actually shake, and my mind goes blank, and I just want to run away.”

He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. “But you don’t, Anidori, do you? You stay and you try. You are so much braver than I. And as you keep trying, the rest will come.”

She nodded and soaked in his comfort for a moment in silence.

Falada nosed her shoulder. *I thought we were going running*.

Ani smiled and smeared the tears across her cheeks. “I think my horse is anxious for a ride.”

“Yes, ride.” His face brightened as he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her brow. “And as much as I love you, my dear, I am afraid Tirean and I are going to have to teach the two of you a lesson in speed.”

“Oh, really?” She laughed, knowing that the king’s mare rarely outran Falada.

“Yes, yes, off we go.” The king mounted and immediately began a canter that streaked into a run. He was heading for a fence that separated the ends of the training grounds from the loosely wooded wilds, and he was, indeed, riding fast. His speed made her feel uneasy. She called out to him. He waved a hand in the air and continued his assault toward the fence.

“It’s too high,” she shouted, but he could not hear her now. She mounted Falada and asked him to follow. They had only halved his distance when the king reached the fence. Tirean leapt.

“Father!” she said.

There was a sound like bones rubbing together as the mare’s hoof just scraped the post. Tirean’s balance tilted. The king looked down as his mount fell. It looked wrong to Ani, that graceful, long-legged horse and that tall man, creatures that should stand and run, instead hitting the earth like discarded things. When Tirean regained her feet, the king remained on the ground.

Ani jumped off Falada’s back and ran to the fence. Other stable-hands were there before her. “Easy, easy,” she heard more than one voice say. When they tried to approach the prostrate king, the mare screeched, stepped over him, and straddled his body protectively. They stepped forward slowly, and Tirean glared with one round black eye and huffed warning through wide nostrils. The stable-hands stepped back, afraid the horse would trample the king.

Ani slipped through the fence and put out her hand. “Please, Tirean, step away.”

She could not speak truly to this horse or any other, just to her own Falada, who had heard her speak his name at birth. Tirean was dumb to the words and shook her head at Ani’s hand. Ani reached for Tirean’s halter, and the mare nodded up and down, whipping the reins against the snow. Ani felt too tired to move. Her father was facedown, one arm sprawled, one tucked beneath his chest. She could not tell if he was dead or if he slept, only that he did not open his eyes. Ani turned to Falada on the other side of the fence.

Falada, she needs to move.

Falada circled back, began a quick canter, and jumped the fence. The mare started at his leap but did not move away from the king. Falada shook his mane and walked forward to touch noses with the mare. He nudged her with his cheek and breathed on her neck. Tirean seemed to sigh, a gust of warm breath that played in Falada’s mane. She stepped back carefully and huddled against a tree, her neck and mane shuddering, her head bent to the ground.

Ani rushed to him and heard his breath rattle strangely in his chest. She bade the stable-hands move the king to the stable-master’s bed, where he slept for three days. The palace physicians could not wake him. The queen sat by his side, dry-eyed, sleepless. Calib, Napralina, Susena-Ofelienna, and the toddler Rianno-Hancery took turns holding his hand. Ani sat in a chair, gazing at his still face, and felt again like the little girl who had watched her aunt walk away into the purple horizon, her chest an abandoned snail shell.

On the fourth day, the king woke briefly to smile up at Susena, who was holding his hand at the time. His eyes fluttered closed, then he turned his head to one side and did not breathe in again.

The Great City was decked with white on the day of his burial. The royal family in white mourning dress walked like ghosts after the funeral wagon. Ani gripped her skirts in her fists and concentrated on the single note of the flute player and Rianno-Hancery’s high, sobbing cries twisting about one another in a painful harmony. She looked up where the White Stone Palace stretched its walls like low wings and raised the head of its single high tower to the winter blue—so like a swan, the bird of mourning. She took a shred of comfort in imagining that even the palace mourned. Her mother walked at the head of her remaining family, elegant and poised in her

sorrow. Ani thought, *These people watch me, their future queen. I need to seem strong.* She straightened and stopped her tears, but next to her mother, she felt only half-formed.

After the burial and ceremony, the queen stood before the tomb and spoke to the gathered people. She recalled the king's diplomatic and military successes, the alliances he had formed, and the peace Kildenree had enjoyed since his coronation. To herself, Ani remembered other things, like his smile that pulled stronger on his right side than his left, the smell of the sheep oil he kept on his beard, and how these last years he had begun to smell less of parchment wax and more of stables. That made her smile.

Then the queen said, "Do not fear that this sad day means more than the end of this king's life. We will go on. I will continue as your queen and keeper of the realm. And in that distant day when you will carry my body to this place, my noble and capable son Calib-Loncris will be ready to take up the scepter and crown."

Ani looked up, her mouth slightly agape. Selia at her side pinched her arm.

"Did you hear that, Crown Princess?"

Ani shook her head slowly. "She made a mistake. She must be . . . she is confused in her sorrow, that's all."

"Calib doesn't look confused," said Selia.

Ani caught sight of her fifteen-year-old brother standing to her mother's right. *When had he grown up so much?* she wondered. He was as tall as his very tall mother, and his face was smooth and controlled like hers.

The queen finished and descended the tomb steps. Calib looked at Ani for the first time, hesitated, then stepped close to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. His forehead creased, and his eyes filled with the concern of an uncertain boy.

"How long have you known she would do this?" said Ani.

Calib shrugged. There was a trace of smugness in his refusal to smile, before he turned and walked stately after his mother.



Selia prodded, but Ani refused to talk to her mother until after the six weeks of mourning white.

"She is your mother, and she owes you an explanation."

Ani sighed. “First, she is the queen, and she owes me nothing. Besides, I don’t want to soil my father’s mourning with greedy or offended thoughts.” And also, Ani admitted to herself, she was afraid of the answer. Was her mother really capable of taking away everything Ani had worked and worried and studied and sweated for just on caprice? Ani took Selia’s hand and they leaned back on a courtyard bench, the sides of their heads touching.

“After the six weeks, then. But I will not let you avoid it. She is fooling with your future.”

“Thank you, Selia. I would feel so alone right now without you.”

Selia patted her hand. Ani was thoughtful, watching the winter sky warm up into a bird’s-egg blue. The brilliant pain after her father’s death was subsiding into a mean ache, but Ani was not yet ready to let it go.

“Selia, why do you worry so much about what my mother said?”

It suddenly seemed to Ani that Selia’s passion on the subject went beyond the feelings of a concerned friend. But Selia did not answer. They sat in silence, the question hanging between them in the chilly afternoon like a frozen breath.



At the end of six weeks, Ani stood outside the queen’s study, rallying her nerve. Selia waved encouragement from down the corridor and then went into her own apartment to await the outcome.

“Enter,” said the queen.

Ani took a deep breath. The queen was gifted with people-speaking, and Ani knew that arguing against her mother’s powers of persuasion was difficult—almost as difficult as explaining to Selia if she did not question her.

“Mother, I ask pardon for intruding so soon after the mourning period, but I must ask you about your statement some weeks ago—”

“Yes, yes, child, about Calib-Loncris. Sit down.” The queen was at her desk, looking over a parchment. She did not glance up. This was one of her tactics. Ani had been forceful and prepared, and now she was made to sit and wait at the whim of the queen.

When the queen at last set down the parchment and met her daughter’s eyes, Ani was expecting an accusing stare and was surprised by the sorrow

that weighed down her features. She could not tell if the sorrow was for her father or for her. A thought buzzed in Ani's head: *I do not know this woman at all.* Her stomach turned uneasily.

The queen met her eyes with a firm blue stare. "You remember, five years ago we received a visit from Prime Minister Odaccar of Bayern." Ani nodded. It had been the year Falada was born. "It was not an idle visit. The prime minister does not journey for three months to have tea with the queen and king of Kildenree. There were issues of land."

The queen stood in front of the wall map and put her left hand, fingers spread, over the mass of Bavara Mountains and the great Forest that separated the two kingdoms. She looked at her hand a moment before speaking. "Bayern has long been a rich country, maintaining their wealth for centuries by launching successful wars.

"The current sovereign is less belligerent than his ancestors. His own father and two brothers were killed in war when he was a boy, and he has ruled differently. But war was their business, and to replace that kind of income, the king spent years financing mining in their mountains. Successfully. They are following a rich deposit of gold that brings them, each year, closer to Kildenree. At this point, five years since Odaccar visited, they must be very near indeed. There have never been roads through these mountains, so official borders have never been made."

The queen looked up at Ani, her expression forcefully smooth. "Bayern's king was becoming greedy. He claimed the bulk of the mountains for Bayern, leaving us a thin range, weak protection from a country so much larger than ours. And stronger. Your father feared intrigue. As did I. Your father did nothing but fear. I acted."

Her mother's magic with words was worming into Ani's mind. Already she was thinking, *Yes, fine, whatever you did is fine.* She pricked herself again and warned herself not to fall into the role of complacent listener.

The queen sat down and pressed her fingers against the corners of her eyes. "I have done what a queen should and what is best for Kildenree. The wide mountain range and the vastness of the Forest have kept us separated from our dangerous neighbors. In the past it would have taken an army four months at best to reach us by the Forest Road—the only road. Now, what is to defend us when the pass is cut? What will prevent that monstrous army from pouring into this valley? Nearly a generation of our men was killed in

the civil war before your father and I were placed in power. Our armies are insufficient."

She seemed to be talking to herself now, and her tone was near pleading. Ani felt dread begin to prickle her skin. Her mother never pleaded.

"You are the crown princess. If it had to be one of my children, it should have been Napralina, I know. She is the third child, the second daughter, just the prize such an arrangement would require. But she was so young, and you—you were different. After the trouble with your aunt, I worried that the people would never trust you, that the rumors of your being a beast-speaker had sunk too deep."

"What did you do, Mother?" said Ani.

The queen ignored the question. Her voice twanged defensively. "A queen is never so secure that she can ignore what her people think of her, Anidori."

"What did you do?"

"Did you not pass your sixteenth birthday during the mourning period?"

Ani nodded.

The queen took an audible breath and looked back at the map. "It was fortunate, truly, that Odaccar wished for peace as much as I. In private counsel, we arranged your marriage to the king's first son. After your sixteenth birthday."

Ani stood, her chair scraping against the tile floor with a whine. The sound roused her, and she found she could argue back. "What? But, but you can't."

"I do not want you to tell me that what I did is not fair. I know it is not fair."

"But I am the crown princess. I am supposed to be the next queen. The law says I am the next queen."

"Your motivation has always seemed to come more from duty than desire. I imagined you might even be relieved."

"Do not pretend that you are doing me a favor, Mother. You can't just take away who I am. Whether or not you think I . . . I am good enough to be queen of Kildenree, that is what you have raised me to be, what I have worked at all my life." Ani narrowed her eyes as realization burned her blood, and her voice softened with the pain of betrayal. "Is this why you kept me away from my siblings all these years? Not because you were training me to be queen, but rather protecting them from me because you

knew you would be sending me away? Separation, elevation, delegation—it was all just a ruse."

"You will still be a queen, Anidori."

Ani shook her head. "You know it's not the same. It will not be my crown. It will not be my home. I'll be a stranger, the foreigner wife of their king."

Her mother glared. "What do you want? You want me to coddle you and feel sorry for you?"

"I just—"

"I will not have you questioning me!" The queen bolted upright. Instinctively, Ani covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

"You are understandably angry, but that will not change the promises I have made, nor will it change what you will do."

Tears stung Ani's eyes, and she slowly lowered her hand from her mouth. "Did Father know?"

"No, he did not," said the queen with some contempt. "He did not want to know. I told him I arranged the marriage for Napralina, that we would tell her when she turned fifteen, and by the time he found out it was you, it would be too late for him to change it. Had he known, he would have felt he needed to protect you. Protect a future queen! You should have been strong enough not to need protection."

"I was only a little girl then."

The queen shook her head. "You should never have been only a little girl, you should have always been a crown princess."

"All right, enough," said Ani, too hurt to bear another word, and to her surprise her mother did not answer back. Her heartbeats shook her body, and she stood in silence awhile, trying to think of more things she would like to say. Battling her mother exhausted her, and hopelessness readily sucked away her anger.

The map glared at her from the wall. The Great City Valley nestled in a curve of the Bavara Mountain Range. Farmlands radiated west and south like fingers from a palm. To the north and northeast, a mass of arrowheads represented the mountains. To the east and southeast, a tight group of crossed lines indicated the Forest. Past those great barriers was a white space and, in its center in script so perfectly tiny that it looked to have been written by a cricket's claw, the word *BAYERN*.

Her eyes followed the long road that began south of the Great City and moved east, curving northeast and then north to eventually form three-quarters of a circle. It wound for weeks through the Forest and ended in that white space, that unknown. She looked down at the lines on her palm. They were all straight, not curved and long like the line of the road.

"Bayern," said Ani.

"I am sorry, Anidori," said the queen.

It was the first time she had heard her mother speak those words. They did not console. In them, she heard her mother saying, *I am sorry I had to choose such for you, and I am sorry, for I know you will do what I chose.* Ani saw herself clearly in that moment, as a face in darkness gains sudden dimensions in a flash of lightning—a young girl, a silly thing, a lapdog, a broken mare. She did as she was told. She rarely gave thought to her duties or spent deep hours or acted alone. She realized she would never have been capable of taking her mother's place. That realization did not bring relief. Instead, the thought of the journey and her unknown future chilled her skin and pricked her stomach with dread.

"I will go, but you already know that, don't you?" Ani looked at the window where the bare branches of a cherry tree crossed out the view. "I'll go."

Chapter 3

Spring shrugged off its late snows and early pollen and settled into warmness, keen for summer. For Ani, the sudden dismissal from responsibilities was bewildering. She and Selia spent days wandering around the corridors, looking for something to do. Courtiers nodded to her but did not meet the eyes of the crown princess who had been deemed unworthy to rule. Those who did address her clipped her title to "Princess" and the "Crown" was passed on to her brother. All except for Selia. Stubbornly loyal, her lady-in-waiting still insisted on using her full and original title.

Selia was, of course, wrathful to hear what the queen had done.

"You cannot just allow her to take away what is rightfully yours."

"And I cannot take it back. I have no power here, Selia."

But quickly Selia seemed to see the futility in mourning the inevitable. At least she stopped berating Ani's passivity and even began to show eagerness for the journey.

"Just think of it, Crown Princess, you can start a new life with new possibilities. You will decide who you are."

It was little consolation at the moment, knowing that she was leaving everything she had ever known to marry a foreign prince whom no one seemed to know much about. And the betrayal still stung, as did the knowledge that had she been good enough, she would still be crown princess and Napralina would be looking forward to a long journey after her sixteenth birthday.

Selia asked to spend much of her remaining period with her mother, and Ani suddenly found time to squander in the summering world. It was a relief to be with Falada, who had never cared if Ani had a "Crown" before her name. Calib was busy with his new duties and seemed to guiltily avoid Ani's presence when he could, but Ani stole afternoons with Napralina and Susena and regretted having known them so little before. Days pushed by. The time to journey quickly arrived.



On the morning of departure, Ani woke with a gasp. The total blackness disturbed her, and she sat up quickly, touching her eyes to see if they were still there. A little moonlight seeped through her curtains and comforted her. It was just early.

Her nightmare still clung to her like the smell of smoke to cloth. Heralded by trumpets, serving boys had carried her into the banquet hall kneeling on a platter garnished with blue cabbage leaves and water lilies. She wore her white nightgown. Purple cherries dripping syrup had replaced her eyes. Her arms were strained backward as though she wished to fly away. They set her down before her mother, who lifted a carving knife and said, “It is your duty, daughter, for the good of the feast.”

Remembering the dream made her laugh a little. “Don’t be so dramatic,” she told herself. “It’s not as though she is sending me off to be killed.” The dream, no doubt, had been inspired by the farewell banquet of last evening. The main course had been white swans roasted in their feathers.

Ani opened her curtains and breathed in the warm night air. Cricket voices battled for more night, and she wished she could grant it to them. Her brown travel dress with wide skirts hung over a chair. When the sun rose, she would go.

From her window she could not see the direction they would travel, so she sat facing north and contemplated the familiar view. No more crying, she told herself. It was not difficult. Her eyes were dry and sore. She concentrated on forming the images and sensations of her Kildenrean life into a body, and in her mind burying that body, peacefully, next to her father’s tomb in the soft summer earth.

Ani was still at the window watching the sun conquer early morning blue with hot gold light when her maid entered. She exclaimed at the late hour, helped Ani dress, and braided her hair in one long plait down her back, unadorned. Ani felt keenly unroyal, boyish, and sick to her stomach.

The escort was waiting for her at the front gates. The queen had arranged for a forty-man company, led by Talone, former watcher of the east gate, to accompany Ani on the nearly three-month journey to Bayern. One-fifth of the escort drove wagons full of supplies, as well as dresses and cloaks and gilded things that were given to Ani as last gifts. Her siblings stood before the wagons, squinting against the rising sun. Napralina and Susena cried sleepily. Calib looked distant, though when he returned her gaze she saw his eyes were full of emotion.

Ani embraced her sisters, then stood before Calib, placing her hands on his shoulders. He looked down.

"It's all right, Calib," she said. "I was upset at first, but I'm resigned to it now. The crown is yours. Enjoy it, and do it better than I would have."

His chin began to quiver, and he turned away before he could cry.

Next to Calib, Selia was smiling and mounted on her gray horse. Falada stood alone. His new saddle was a pale golden red, vibrant against his white coat. *At least he looks royal*, Ani thought. She was grateful that in this one regard her mother had respected her wishes—she would not be made to ride the endless weeks inside a carriage like a caged bird.

It is early, said Falada.

Yes, but I am late coming, said Ani. *I am not happy to leave.*

Nor I. My stall was nice and food was good. But the new place will have nice stalls and good food, too.

She imagined it would, and she wished she was as easily comforted as a horse, but the long road intimidated her, and her inability to imagine any part of her new life left it dark and daunting in her mind—a distant place, a warlike people, a shadowed husband with a face she could not imagine. Tales of naive young girls marrying murderous men performed grimly in her mind. Ani put her arms around Falada's neck and briefly hid her face in his mane. His warmth encouraged her.

"Behold, my royal daughter," said the queen.

Ani looked up. The attention of the forty-man company, royal family, and small group of well-wishers turned to the queen, who was holding aloft a beaten gold cup. A reflected glare of sunlight made Ani close her eyes and Falada lower his head. *Ah*, thought Ani, *time for the show of affection*.

"The road is long, and she will walk upon fir needles rather than velvet carpets. So let her always drink from this. The lips of our honored daughter will never touch the vulgar thing."

Ingris, the camp-master, nodded gravely and took the cup from the queen.

"And let all who see her mark her as our royal daughter and princess." At that the queen placed on Ani's head a circlet of gold with three ruby droplets pressed against her brow. The gold was cold. Her neck pricked with goose bumps.

The queen gave Ani a mother's adoring stare, and Ani returned it coldly. She was in no mood to pretend love between them. She had no more duty to

these people save to leave them. The queen flinched under her gaze, and her eyes hinted at guilt and sadness. A childlike hope tickled in Ani—*Is she sad for me? Is she sorry to lose me?*

The queen pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from her sleeve and smoothed it open. It was made from a thin ivory cloth with green, rust, and yellow lace edging.

"The stitching was done by my grandmother." Her voice was soft, as though to convince Ani that the words were for her alone and not a performance for the crowd. She unfastened a horse-head brooch from her breast. "My mother used to carry it, and then she gave it to me before she died. I have always felt it held a part of her. When I wear it, I feel her eyes on me, approving, guiding, protecting. So I send with you my own protection."

The queen winced first, then stabbed her third finger with the brooch pin. She squeezed three drops of blood onto the handkerchief. Her hands were shaking.

"I have nightmares that the Forest, like a great-jawed beast, swallows the road in front of you and sucks you into its mouth. If anything should happen to you, it would break my heart." She put the stained handkerchief in Ani's hand and held it a moment, sincerity straining her brow. "We are of one blood. I will protect you."

Ani felt overwhelmed by this sudden force of affection. Should they embrace now? Should she kiss her cheek? They stood there, the queen vehemently earnest, Ani awkward, until the queen turned back to the fifty-some watchers with an attention-calling flourish of her hand.

"The Princess Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, jewel of Kildenree. Let the road carry her lightly, for she is my daughter."

Ani felt the crowd shudder at the power in the queen's voice. *Would that her voice accompanied me*, thought Ani, *and not a stained handkerchief*. The thing felt thin and warm in her hand. She squeezed it and wished it were more than a token, wished it really could somehow carry safety and home and the love of a mother.

The escort was mounted and waiting. Ani tucked the handkerchief into her bodice and mounted Falada. She, who had never ridden through the palace front gates, would lead the way. Her mother stood beside them, straight as the stone posts. Again Ani thought, *How lovely she is*, and again she thought, *How unlike her am I*. But now, for the first time, she also felt a

yearning like the beginnings of a yawn arching in her chest to have that separation and to become, finally, who she would be.

To the southwest lay the beginning of the Forest Road and the beginning of any answer she might find. She pushed her legs against Falada's sides, and he started a fast walk. She could hear the key-mistress's wailing cry, so like a mourner's song. It trailed after them until the company turned a corner, and the song snuffed out quick as a candle flame between wet fingers.

It was early. With at least two wagons full of treasures, Ani felt more like a thief sneaking away with a bounty than a princess on her way to her betrothed. And she felt exposed and sore, alone at the group head and vulnerable outside the palace walls.

Once they passed through the outer palace walls and down several blocks of the main avenue, Ani and Falada pulled back and let Talone lead the way. The guard fell into a triangle around her, and the feeling of walls their mounts made comforted Ani. Selia joined her in the center. Her horse stood three hands shorter than Falada, forcing Selia to look up to speak to her mistress.

"We will reach the borders of the city by evening, Crown Princess, and can sup and sleep at a tavern just outside the city gate. The Blue Mouse. Ungolad recommends its pork pies especially. He says we will wish for good tavern food once we're dining only on rough travel fare."

"Ungolad?"

Selia pointed to a guard riding on the heels of Talone. He had hair longer than most that he kept in two yellow braids down his back. He did not appear tall, even on horseback, but the broadness of his shoulders and the thick muscles of his arms and chest pressed through his tunic and vest and demanded he be recognized as a warrior. He turned his head as though he had heard his name spoken. Ani quickly looked away.

"Ugh, I am so glad to finally leave everything behind and just get moving, aren't you?" said Selia.

Selia was in an eager mood, and she made light observations as they rode. Once or twice she managed to get Ani to laugh. The morning almost felt pleasant. Ani looked at all the marvels of the city, the wide avenue and branches of narrow streets, the thundering of blacksmiths and calls of hawkers and click of shoed horses on cobblestones, and all the people who looked up from their work or out from windows to watch her pass. Why had

she never insisted to her mother that she be allowed out in the city before? Her life locked inside palace walls seemed stunted and dull.

They arrived at the Blue Mouse just before nightfall. Ingras arranged for Ani to have a private room to sup. As Talone, Ingras, and Selia escorted her through the main room, Ani looked longingly at the huge fire, tavern singer, and crowd of unknown people. She thought about asking to eat downstairs with the rest of the escort but knew that Ingras, a man fanatically devoted to the queen, would refuse.

Selia, too, seemed to desire the excitement of the public room. Throughout supper, she watched the door and drummed her fingers to the rhythm of the tavern song that leaked through the walls.

"You may go down if you wish, Selia," said Ani.

She smiled. "Oh, I am too saddle-sore for wood benches. Anyhow, I don't want to leave you alone."

"You are a good friend."

"Mmm," she said, tapping her foot in time.

Ani noted that Selia seemed anxious that night and every night they spent in tavern lodging. During the day she was high-spirited and eager to talk, but then she seemed to begrudge the hour when they had to stop their journey.

"I would walk straight there if I could," she said once.

Ani did not understand her enthusiasm for arrival. For her, the journey was freedom and new sights, but the end of the road meant a return to both acting and failing at the part of princess, as well as a marriage to . . . to someone.

He is probably a colt with wobbly legs, said Ani, *or an old gelding who slobbers and has to be fed oats by hand*.

Falada whipped her heels with his tail in a teasing acknowledgment of what she had said but did not respond. Ani knew he did not care whom she married as long as she still brushed him and fed him and took him out for wonderful, leg-stretching rides.

Three days from the palace, the party left city dwellings behind and entered the rolling lowlands of wheat, corn, and hay fields dotted with farmhouses and small town clusters. The air was sweet and dry, and the company was in a good humor.

They stopped each night as soon as they found an inn, and occasionally they were its only occupants. On those nights, Ingras allowed Ani to sup

with the company in the public room. Yulan, Uril, and some of the others were boisterous and sang rowdy songs to satisfy the absence of a minstrel. Ingras endured it, blushing, and even let Ani try a sip of ale, which she found she did not enjoy at all. Talone, the captain of the guard, did not quiet them until, like a father with unruly children, he felt the furniture was in danger or the hour too late. Ani noticed on these nights that Selia and Ungolad often stole moments in quiet conversation. Once she saw him rub Selia's arm in a familiar way.

After two weeks of travel, the landscape began to ease upward, and scatterings of pine and fir trees gathered in with the birches. They passed no more farms. The land was wild with grasses and patches of purple heather like new bruises. A dark spot loomed on the horizon, a great green, lightless sea submerging their path. To the left, the mountains rose and the trees climbed their heights, leaving just the peaks as bare, gray rock. To the right, the open lowlands reached wide to the south. But ahead of them, in the east and north, the land was completely lost in the greatness of the Forest.

The party grew quiet as they neared the lip of the Forest. Ani took a last look behind her at the friendly lowlands, a deep breath before plunging underwater. She felt the cool shadow of the trees pass over her, and she shivered.

That first day in the woods seemed to stretch as long as the road before them, full of new noises, new smells, a feeling of closeness that was not comfortable like smooth palace walls or stone tavern rooms. Most of the company had never been inside a forest and cast uncomfortable glances into the ragged darkness, letting the sharp, sweet smell of pine mix in their heads with the tales of dark deeds and unnatural things. As the darkness slowly thickened into evening, Ani observed more and more guards instinctively gripping sword hilts.

That night was the first slept under the sky. Ingras ordered a small tent, the only private one in the camp, assembled for the princess. Even under the eaves of evergreens, he insisted on treating Ani as her mother had wished. Drinking from a gold cup in that wilderness seemed ridiculous to Ani and, she thought, to the rest of the company as well, but she was accustomed to being served and made no protest. Selia helped her undress in the privacy of the tent and then set up her own bedroll just outside.

"There is room for another," said Ani, though there scarcely was.

"No, I am fine out here, Crown Princess," said Selia.

Ani lay down in the strange solitude of her tent, closed in by walls only paper-thin. She could hear Falada move somewhere near.

Falada, the camp horse-master wanted me to tie you up with the others.

I will not run away.

I know, she said. *Neither will I*.

The night was cool. The day world was summer, but the night still dipped its ladle into the well of spring air. Even through her mat, Ani could feel the stony earth, and its chill hardened her bones. The trees made noises that she had never heard, hissing and sighing like a new kind of animal. The wind brushed through the tent flap and against her cheek, waking her with words that she did not understand.



In the first few days, Selia and most of the others seemed silenced by the forest shadows. But the Forest did not spook Falada, and Ani soon caught his mood. She liked how she felt surrounded by trees, mixing the feeling of safety in close quarters with open possibilities. Dew fed the moss and lichen, trees creaked and moaned with growing, and birds conversed in the spiny branches. Ani's ears reached for the sounds of their chatter, and she felt like smiling to discover that she understood. She did not know what birds they were, but their language was so close to the sparrows' she knew from the palace gardens that it was like hearing someone speak her same language but with a different accent. Besides the birds, other forest animals appeared—intermittent sightings of foxes, red deer, wild pigs, and, once, wolves.

Just a week into the forest, Falada woke Ani, saying, *Mad wolves. Coming toward the camp*.

"Wolves! Rabid wolves!" Ani crawled out of her tent, shouting. The night guard shook himself awake and kicked the bodies of the best archers. They rubbed their eyes and strung their bows.

"Where?" said the guard with sleepy incredulity.

Falada told her, and she pointed. Other horses were prancing and testing the ropes that held them. The commotion woke the camp, and all sat up in their bedrolls and looked into the distance that was neither near nor far in the absolute dark. Out there, something moved, shadow sliding on shadow.

It leapt. The dying fire picked out eyes and teeth. Then, with a whisk of wind, a pale shaft pierced him through the throat. He fell to the earth at the first archer's feet. His two companions were similarly downed with the hard, sharp whip sound of arrows in the dark, and in the long silence that followed, someone sighed in relief.

The next morning, Ani noticed how many of the guards now looked at her with the same wariness that marked their eyes when they contemplated the dark profundities of the forest.

I thought they would be grateful, said Ani.

Falada snorted and idly pawed a stone. In his opinion, people never made sense.

Ani scolded herself. Just because they had left Kildenree did not mean these companions would feel any better disposed to her speaking gifts than had the sour-skinned nurse-mary. A brown-speckled forest bird whistled at her passing. Ani looked down and refused to listen.



Some days later, Ani felt the tension finally ease. Spirited conversation and laughter returned, mostly centered around Selia. Many of the guards sought to ride near her, and Ungolad most of all. Ani observed that he often rode by her side and seemed to find reasons to touch her, reach out to pick a pine needle from her skirt or examine a scratch on her hand. Ani hoped a romance might make the journey worth-while to her faithful lady-in-waiting.

Ani had been lagging behind, talking with Falada, but at the sound of wild laughter she trotted forward to join the lively group. As soon as she neared, the laughing ceased. No one looked at her.

"Did I miss a good joke? " said Ani.

"No, not really, " said Selia.

One of the guards said something to Ungolad that Ani could not hear. No one else spoke.

"The days are certainly warmer now, " she said.

"Yes, Princess, " said the guard Uril.

"Well, that breeze is pleasant, isn't it? "

"If you say so, Princess. "

"Mmm. "

Ani, confused, looked at Selia. Her lady-in-waiting glanced up briefly and gave a subtle shrug that said, *What do you want from me?* Coolly, she set her gaze at the passing trees as though Ani did not exist.

Ani scowled, scraping her memory for everything she had said and done that day. Had she inadvertently offended Selia and half the members of her escort guard? They could not possibly still be upset just because she knew the wolves were coming before they did. No reasons made sense to her, and the silence became unbearable. At last she flicked Falada into a trot. Once she left the group, conversation resumed behind her and Selia's lovely laugh rang out. Emotion caught in Ani's throat, and she hummed quietly to ease the tightness.

As always, Talone rode at the front of the company, his ardent gaze sweeping about as though he expected a bandit attack any moment. Ani asked Falada to slow to a walk beside him. His silence made her wonder if what she had done to affront the others also included Talone, but soon he spoke.

"I don't know if you recall, Princess, but we have been alone before." His stoic face relaxed a little as he raised his eyebrows in an amused query.

Ani tried to remember. She had so rarely been alone.

"It was about ten years ago, I think."

"Oh," said Ani, "was that you who took me from the shore of the swan pond?"

"Well done. You were very young. It scared me how the fever chills racked your tiny body. And know, Princess, that it is not easy for a brave soldier to admit to ever being scared."

"I'll remember that of you if ever I'm in need of a brave soldier," said Ani, teasing.

"Yes, well, if the danger can be stuck with a sword, I am your man." He smiled at her and quickly returned to watching the road.

"You are ever vigilant," she said.

"Mmm. For such a long journey, this terrain is dangerous. If there was a road cut through the Bavara Mountains, one could reach Bayern in a matter of a fortnight. But the Forest Road circumscribes the mountains. The Forest itself is striped with gorges, and the road doubles in length to avoid them. A straighter path would have to cross many bridges."

As he spoke, Ani saw the way in front of them begin to wind sharply up and left. The road cut across a long arm of mountain, and between there and

the next arm the ground dropped into a deep and narrow ravine.

"Gorge to the right, mountain to the left," said Ani.

"There's much flat land in the forest, but the climbs and drops are unpredictable."

The Forest did not seem dangerous to her, just dark and brooding. She envied the permanence of the tall, thick-trunked firs that had stood in one place for generations. Her own family had always lived in Great City Valley. She was the first of her line born as crown princess, the first to leave the valley, the first to see the Forest. She wished it had been her choosing, that she had been the kind of person who would steal a horse and leave in the night to find adventure instead of one who is handed duty and numbly complies.

This road is long, said Falada. *How long until we arrive?*

Weeks yet, said Ani.

A warm breeze came up from the gorge beneath them and stirred their hair. Falada flicked his tail at it and walked a little faster.



That evening a stream passed near the road and Talone called for an early camp. It had been a week since they had found moving water. Their water barrels were low, and the company was irritable with dust, stink, and horse hair. Ingras set up a metal tub in Ani's tent and ordered water heated for her bath. While Ani soaked in the hot water in her thin privacy, the rest of the company hiked to the mountain runoff to scrub their clothes and themselves, Selia upstream and the men down. Talone assigned Ishta, a thin man with a long, tipped nose, to guard Ani. Ishta did not seem too concerned about bathing.

It was dark before the others returned. Ani dried her hair by the fire and waited. Ishta stood on the other side of the fire. The light turned his face orange, the hollows of his cheeks still in shadow. She could hear him scrape the undersides of his fingernails with a knife.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, with a lilt that seemed feminine. "How is it, Princess, to bathe in nice, warm water in your own little tent?"

"It is nice, thank you," said Ani with some unease.

"Mmm." He took a step forward. "You like being a princess?"

"I don't know. It is what I am. Do you like being a man?"

He walked to her, dead pine needles breaking like glass under his boots, and crouched beside her. He leaned in. Her pulse snapped in her throat.

"Do you like that I am a man?" He smiled. His teeth looked rotted at the roots.

"Step back," she whispered. He held his face there, and up close his expression was leering, inhuman, his face as sharp as a weapon, his breath the promise of ugly things. Ani gripped her brush in both hands and could not seem to let it go, not to push him away, not to push herself to her feet. Never had she felt this way, helpless, alone, no servant to call, no guard outside her door. No door. And a man who came too close.

"Step back, Ishta," she said again, but her voice held no more of the authority of her mother than the chattering of a magpie. He sneered.

There was a sound of bent underbrush and low laughter. Ishta stood and casually walked away as a group of guards, their faces shiny and red from bathing, entered the camp. Talone added a branch to the fire and sat beside her. Ani looked down at her shaking hands.

"Princess, is something wrong?"

She set her brush on the log and folded her hands. "I'm all right." She had never felt before that someone could hurt her—and enjoy it. That new awareness made her look at Talone with suspicion. He had assigned Ishta to her watch. Had he known? Could she trust him? Who could guard her from her guards?

Ani made her way to her tent, feeling blindly with her slippered toes for rocks and shooting roots. Selia was readying her own bedroll beside the tent. Her wet hair was luminescent in the near dark.

Ani sat on a corner of Selia's blanket, held her knees against her chest, and hoped for conversation. *Something just happened*, she wanted to say. *There was something strange, and I wanted to tell you*, she would say, if Selia seemed in a mood to talk, like they used to do for hours on her balcony, Selia brushing oils through her long hair and relating gossip that had slipped up the stairs from the kitchen or out of the idle mouths of waiting ladies, their promises of secrecy dulled by the tedium of embroidery. Ani longed now for such an hour, the comfort of casual talk and a warm blanket around her shoulders to hold off the heavy blackness of so much space at their backs. She waited for Selia, who liked to start conversations on her own terms. Selia finished with her bedroll. She stood by her pillow and said nothing.

“How was your bath?” said Ani.

“Cold.”

“Oh. I’m thoughtless, Selia. Of course you should bathe in camp in warm water.”

“You mean in your used, tepid bathwater? For who is to heat water for the lady-in-waiting? No, thank you, I would rather use the stream.”

“Selia, are you angry?”

Selia turned to her, and in the dark of a night before the moon and too far from the fire, all Ani could see was the pale outline of her cheek and the glint of one eye.

“No, of course not, Crown Princess,” said Selia. Her voice was ordinary again, a lilting tone, pleasing and artless.

“Once we get to Bayern,” said Ani, “there will, thankfully, be hot water and beds again.”

“A very apt observation, Crown Princess.” Her voice was still even and polite. “Yet I believe in Bayern there will be much more waiting for me than just water and goose feathers.”

“What do you mean?”

Selia did not answer. Someone added wood to the fire, and in the sudden flush of light she could see Selia’s face. She was looking across the camp. Ani turned. Ungolad stood by the fire. His eyes were on Ani. He smiled a closed smile, not showing any teeth.

Chapter 4

The first four weeks of forest travel had merged into one another in the perpetual landscape of firs and pines. Despite the tension, Ani found she enjoyed the journey. A breeze moved across her face, and she fancied it was the breeze of the trees' breathing, the pines on either side inhaling and exhaling across the road.

"The tales that trees could tell, the stories wind would sing," Ani said to herself. It was a piece from a rhyme, one that as a child she had begged the nurse-marys to sing. It had filled her with wonder and mystery and made her want to throw off her shoes and hat and run to meet the wildness just outside the closed panes. Her aunt had once spoken of the knowledge of speaking not with animals, but with the elements of nature. And she thought of the story of her birth, how she had not opened her eyes for three days. Her aunt had said she was born with a first word on her tongue and would not wake for trying to taste it. *What word*? she wondered.

The stories wind would sing. Just then, she could not think of the rest of the rhyme.

Ani noticed Talone scanning the roadside for a marker and trotted up to join him.

"There will be a notched tree on the right hand to mark halfway, Princess," he said. "Or so the last trader we passed informed me. We are at a disadvantage here, none of us having ridden this road. Except Ungolad."

"Can you tell me about Ungolad?"

"He was a tradesman escort for a time, but he has not ridden the Forest Road in ten years. Still, I imagined he would be a greater asset to this trek than he has been. He volunteered, you know. They all did." Ani raised her eyebrows, and Talone nodded. "The queen did not need to command anyone to join this guard."

"But why?" said Ani. "I thought that the prospect of riding weeks through a forest would be daunting to anyone."

"Oh, not to many of us, I think. We are stout warriors, after all." He thumped his chest and smiled.

"Indeed. And I think it best that I forget how many stout warriors I saw gripping their swords and getting headaches from squinting at the trees on

our first week here."

Talone cast a glance of mock terror into the depth of trees to the side. His expression made her laugh, and she realized how much she wanted to trust him.

"But what interest could a man like Ungolad have in being in this guard?"

"I don't know. I tell you truly, Princess, I was hesitant to accept Ungolad's company when he volunteered. He has always been a little unpredictable, and traders' escorts often garner as little respect as mercenaries. But he is a member of the royal army now, and he has been to Bayern before. Look, here it is."

On their right hand, a trunk of living fir was carved with the symbol of Bayern's sun and crown.

"We are halfway," said Talone.

"That symbol—does Bayern claim this road, then?"

"Kildenree does not. Technically it is neutral territory. But if Kildenreans do not live here, what is to stop the Bayern if they so desire?" His voice grew softer. "If a country like Bayern decided they liked the looks of the Great City Valley, they could take it without much ado."

Ingras trotted to them. "Captain, time for a midday halt."

"All halt!"

As she unsaddled Falada, Ani heard the soldiers conferring pleasantly. "Midway, we have passed midway."

"Midway, not long now, lads." Ungolad's voice was encouraging, and he slapped a few on the back. He saw Ani watching and added, "Not long now, Princess."

After eating, Ani wanted a different brush for Falada and went back to the supply wagon to retrieve it. Selia stood in the third wagon. She was holding up Ani's green gown against her front.

"Selia," said Ani. Selia jumped, dropping the dress.

"Oh, hello, Crown Princess," she said, quickly casual.

Ani could not understand why Selia seemed so nervous, and she waited for Selia to speak.

"Just looking at your pretty things." Selia shook off her expression of surprise and smiled, holding up the dress again. "I know I don't have your eyes, but do you not think I would look beautiful in this gown? You are almost my size."

Ani did not respond.

Selia tipped her head to one side. “You’re angry, Crown Princess. You’re jealous of your treasures and don’t want them sullied by a servant.”

“Of course I don’t mind, but Selia, you’re acting so curiously. I can’t believe that it’s just my imagination.”

“I’m sorry,” said Selia.

“No, I am. Are you unhappy to be going to Bayern after all?”

“Not a whit.”

“Then what? I hope I’m still your friend. . . .”

“Yes, your condescension is most entertaining, Crown Princess.” Selia stepped down from the wagon. “You must congratulate yourself that you have treated me better than any servant deserves.”

Selia’s tone made Ani’s fingers feel cold. She swallowed nervously.

“A servant,” said Selia again. She looked down as her face flamed and her chin began to quiver. “All I have ever wanted is what you have. And you, you don’t even care about what you are. And I have had to serve you and call you mistress and wait and wait and wait.” Selia put a hand over her eyes, and her shoulders began to shake. “What a horrid title, lady-in-waiting. I have waited and waited until I thought my bones would crack and my muscles freeze and my mind shrivel like a raisin. And there you were, with horses and tutors and gowns and servants, and all you did was hide in your room.”

Ani felt her lips part in amazement. How could she have been so blind all those years?

“Oh, Selia, I am so sorry I never saw.” Ani placed a hand on her shoulder. Selia slapped it away.

“That is because I was careful that you would not see,” Selia said. Her eyes dried up. “For years I have been waiting for my chance, and now here it is. Don’t touch me and don’t call for me. I am no longer your servant. You, what are you? The brat of lucky parents who were related to a childless king. There is no such thing as royal blood. I believe we are what we make ourselves, and as such, you, Crown Princess, are nothing.” Selia spoke as though she had held those words inside for too long and they burned her mouth as she spoke them.

“But I—you said—I thought you wanted to come.” Ani knew this was not fair but found it difficult to protest. Her thoughts spun and bumped against one another like dizzy children. Was this the effect of the gift of

people-speaking? Every word Selia spoke seemed to be the purest truth. You *are nothing*. *You make yourself nothing*. She took a step back, prepared to back down, as always, ready to apologize and wait for time to ease the memory.

A warm breath of wind came from the deeper trees and ran across Ani's neck. A corner of her mother's handkerchief stood out from her bodice, and the wind tapped it against her breastbone. Ani thought its touch sparked her heart to beat faster, her skin to tingle, her blood to warm her hands and feet. *A gift from my mother*, Ani thought. *Protection*, she had said.

Ani met Selia's stare and straightened her neck.

"Put down the dress, Selia," she said. Selia paused. Ani had never commanded her in anything. "Put down my dress," she repeated.

Selia tossed the dress back in the wagon. Her face was flushed, and her nostrils flared. "Go tell your guards, Crown Princess. Go stir your army. Go demand your throne and teach me a lesson—anything! I dare you."

"I am no longer a crown princess," Ani said, and her own steady tone encouraged her. "You mock me with the title. From now on, you will address me as Princess, or mistress, if you prefer, since you have never seen fit to call me by my name. My friends call me by my name."

"You don't have any friends."

"I don't want you to be my friend, Selia, or my servant, not now. I thought you were both. You have let me know I was wrong. So are you to treat me so. You are wrong."

"Oh, my dear, dear Royal Majesty, you don't know the half of it." Selia started to smile, but she dropped her eyes from Ani's face and walked away.

Ani did not move until she had caught her breath. Her limbs were trembling, and the anger that had suddenly flushed her face and steadied her voice now left her a little worn and a little cold. But, for a moment, she had almost sounded as confident as her mother, and she wondered where the courage to stand up to Selia had come from.

Ani pulled the handkerchief from her bodice. The cloth was old, the original white dimmed with age. Her mother's blood stood out clearly, three spots of dark brown. She fingered the delicate lacing around the edges.

Maybe, she thought, *it is a thing of magic. Maybe my mother's blood renewed its power*.

She thought of the bedside tales that spoke of mothers and blood. A mother who nurses her baby on one breast of milk and one breast of blood,

and her child grows to be a powerful warrior. A young girl is cursed to never become a woman, and when the mother lies dying of old age, she cuts her wrist and washes her daughter in the blood, and the curse is undone. These stories had intrigued her with their strange mix of violence and love, so unlike the distant, passionless affection of her own mother.

She thought, she hoped, that the handkerchief was something fantastic, like a piece of a tale, but real, and just for her, a symbol of the real, hidden love of her mother. She so desperately wanted something magical, something powerful, something that meant her mother had not flung her aside but loved her as deeply as her own heart. Ani tucked the handkerchief back into her bodice, convincing herself that since the gates of the palace, the handkerchief had in some measure been protecting her.

That night, Ani set up her own bedroll. Ingras exclaimed at Selia's refusal to serve, but Ani would not have anyone ordered to be her servant, or her friend. In the privacy of her tent, Ani struggled with the laces of her bodice and called herself a fool for ever trusting anyone. Through the slit in her tent flap she could see Talone instructing the night watch. She wanted to trust him, but that dark encounter with Ishta and Selia's betrayal were both painful barbs she could not pluck out. *At least I have Falada as a true friend*, she thought, *and the handkerchief as protection*.



Two weeks after the halfway mark, a stream pregnant with summer runoff crossed their path and rose to flow over the road's bridge. Talone recommended they halt early and test the sodden wood for rotting before crossing the next day. Ungolad seemed pleased with the diversion, saying that some leagues upstream there was a waterfall.

"A sight for eyes wearied by endless trees," he said. "A sight even royalty might deem worthy to behold." He nodded at Ani.

The main part of the company followed Ungolad up a deer trail along the river. Ani stayed behind, and Ungolad seemed disappointed. But as she brushed Falada, a breeze lifted off the river and wound its damp essence in her hair and wrapped its coolness around her face, and with it, for a moment, she thought she saw the image of a waterfall shimmer before her eyes. Her imagination, she determined, and batted the breeze away.

Still, she had never seen a waterfall, and it would be a pity to pass blindly by. While Talone and others investigated the bridge, Ani took to the deer trail.

The forest ground was spongy but pleasant footing after weeks of riding. She liked the sensation of walking on soil hollowed by deep tree roots, the noise of her steps muted echoes. The smell of pine and cool water freshened the world, and Ani felt eager.

These last days had been tense and strange, the coldness from so many of the guards, Selia's flushed face and eyes shining with anger and hate, and the burden of a handkerchief that throbbed with mystery at her heart. But now, off the road, the forest was pleasing, green like spring wheat and yet ancient and ponderous as the books of the palace library. The upper branches wrestled with the high forest wind. Below, the rumor of the river answered. Ani felt that she moved in the middle of a great conversation between sky and earth.

Soon the sound of crashing water overwhelmed all else. Ani approached the sound and ducked under the branches of a fir. There at her feet burst the white eruptions of the river, shaking the earth and breathing out a mist that wet her hair. The water fell straight for the height of three men, then continued to churn around rocks and smaller falls until the land evened farther downstream. She could see the movements of Ungolad's group above the falls and decided not to join them, enjoying the unfamiliar solitude.

Somewhere behind her she heard the dim call of a bird to its mate. *Fly away, danger*. It was a common cry among the woodland birds she had listened to as a child, and the familiar call in that foreign place made her feel as though the words were spoken to her. *Danger. Fly away*. She reached above her, gripped a branch, and began to step away from the edge.

At the same moment, something knocked the back of her ankles, and her feet slipped. Ani held to the tree and pulled her feet back onto land, and watched the stone that had struck her topple over the edge and drop into the river.

The ground beneath her was slick and wet. If she had not been holding on to a branch at that moment, she would have gone the way of the stone and possibly cracked her head on a rock or been held under by the strong current and drowned. She looked around to see what had disturbed so large a stone. No one. But perhaps, she thought, for just a moment, there had

been a flash of gold. Perhaps it had been the tip of a yellow braid disappearing in the timber and shadow.

Ani ran back to camp, grimacing with each step for her sore ankles, and was brushing Falada when the hikers returned. Ungolad saw her and for a moment seemed surprised to see her alive and dry, but his expression changed again so quickly that she questioned if she had seen truly.

He passed her, patted her shoulder, and said, "You missed a fine waterfall, Princess."

She was not sure that he or anyone had thrown that stone. *But even if he did*, she thought, *I'm protected. I don't need to fear*. She patted the handkerchief at her chest and believed even more fervently that it was protecting her, that she could hear the voice of her mother's blood even as she heard the birds speak.



A week after the waterfall, the company came to a tree as thick as five men that had fallen across the road. While some of the guards and horses worked at moving the obstacle for the wagons, the rest of the company forged their own way through the forest. Ani and Falada wove through the trees a bit apart from the others.

Something is not right, said Falada.

What is it?

I do not know. His ears twisted to listen behind and to the side, but he kept on walking.

Stop a moment, said Ani. She leaned forward to pat his neck.

Suddenly Falada whined and reared. Ani clutched at his mane and gripped his middle with her legs, saying all the while, *Easy, Falada, it is nothing, easy now*.

Falada got his footing back and quieted down. His skin shivered under the saddle.

Something whipped me, he said.

Ani looked back and saw no one. Immediately to the right ran a long gorge, a fall steep enough to break a neck.

Ani and Falada caught up to the rest on the road and pulled alongside Ungolad at the end of the company. She looked the guard over. His braids hung down his back like slain prey thrown over the hunter's shoulder. He

wore a long sword at his side. He was looking forward, squinting in the sun. Some bit of courage was prickling inside her, begging her for action. She considered Ungolad's horse, a bay nearly as tall as Falada.

Falada, can you tell me about this horse and what he thinks of his rider?

Falada whisked his tail and turned an eye to the horse beside him. There was a change in the rhythm of his walk, and he lowered his head. The bay shook his head and picked his hooves up higher. From long association with Falada, Ani thought she could detect the spirit of the bay's response but waited for Falada's words to make her certain. Ungolad noticed the princess's attention, and he smiled at her.

"Do you admire my beast, Princess?" he said.

She nodded. "He is a pretty horse, and you ride him well. He seems a bit meek, but I have observed that you like to be in absolute control."

Ungolad blinked in surprise. She felt surprised herself, and she smiled pleasantly.

"You are a student of men and horses, then," he said, "and I had heard that all you were fit for was to be married off and produce princelings."

Ungolad's comment would have stung, but its carelessness suggested that she had startled him, and she felt encouraged to continue.

"In my study of horses, I can say a fair bit about yours," she said as Falada silently related to her all he had learned. "He was a wild colt, caught and trained later than usual, and had to be thoroughly broken, which made him ridable, but broke his spirit as well. He has had many owners and has been beaten into obedience so often that by the time he came into your hands he was as docile as a cow. He thinks you are unpredictable, heavier than you used to be, and smell unpleasantly. And he has a stone in his right front hoof."

Ungolad laughed with obvious force. "Well, Princess, you have more game spirit in you than I thought." He smiled, and the very tips of his teeth peered through his parted lips.

"Thank you," she said, smiled graciously, and kicked Falada into a trot to the front of the company. Her hands were shaking and blood rushed into her fingertips, and she nearly laughed out loud. She fingered a corner of the handkerchief. *My mother's blood is protecting me*, she thought. *I have nothing to fear.*

At the next stop, she saw Ungolad, glowering, remove a small stone from his horse's right front hoof.



As they neared Bayern, the road pushed the trees farther away, and at midday there was no shade. The company was weary and sun sick. It was a bright and burning afternoon when they passed a small trading party going toward Kildenree.

"Ho there, sir," said Talone. "How many days since you left Bayern?"

"Six days'll take you to the city, if that's where you're going." He lifted his wide-brimmed sun hat as he caught sight of Ani. She smiled at his accent. He spoke his words carelessly, letting each word bleed into the next, his vowels short and consonants ringing out from his throat. She turned to see Selia, wondering if she also remembered that accent from the time the Bayern prime minister visited Kildenree five years ago, but her lady-in-waiting held back by the rear guard. The trader did not see her.

"And how many since the last town or settlement?" said Ungolad.

"Oh, two, I'd say, at a good pace."

Ani saw Ungolad and Selia exchange looks.

That night at camp, there were two fires. Dano, the cook-man, built the first, and Talone, Ingras, the wagon drivers, and some of the guards gathered around it. Ungolad built the second and drew in Selia and the majority of the guards. Ani turned from brushing down Falada to see the camp split into two parts, and she felt that something definite had been decided. She stood between them and did not know what to do.

Talone noticed her and walked to her side. "Princess, you look concerned."

His face was lined with age, his temples graying. He had been faithful to her mother for many years, but did that mean he was faithful to her?

"What is it?" he said.

Ani twisted the handkerchief between her fingers and forced herself to look at him directly in the eyes. "Talone, can I trust you?"

He blinked and looked as though she had wrenched an arrow from his side. "I have failed you if you must ask that question." He put a fist over his heart and said in his strong, solid voice, "I swear fealty to you, Princess Anidori-Kiladra, and promise to shield you to your safety and, if you wish it, will remain your personal guard until my dotage and death."

She blinked at the force of his pledge, and gratitude and relief filled her. Feeling that the oath required a sign of her acceptance, she looked about her

for something to give him. All she had on her person of value were two rings. She slipped one with a ruby droplet from her second finger and placed it in his hand. “Thank you, Talone.”

Talone seemed moved, and lowering his head for a moment so she could not see his eyes, he tucked the ring into his vest pocket. “Thank you, Princess.” He led her to his fire, where the conversation was bubbling with unease at the splitting of the group.

“I don’t like their attitude,” said Adon, Talone’s second in command. He was a young man, eager for action. “Ungolad’s friends make it clear they follow him and not you, Captain. I swear they grow more insubordinate the closer we get to Bayern. Smells like mutiny.”

“Ungolad seemed interested to know how long it would take us to reach the first town,” said Ani.

“They might have friends there,” said Radal.

“Or plan to do something before we reach witnesses,” said Adon.

“Or they are just eager to sleep in a bed and eat real food again,” said Radal. “Aren’t we all?”

“Mmm.” Talone eyed the princess. “I don’t know what it means. It may be they intend to stay in Bayern and not return to Kildenree next spring. But, Princess, if there is any sign of trouble, you jump on the nearest horse and ride away. Do not stop until you get to the king and safety.”

Ani felt goose bumps rise on her arm. “Safety? What do you think they would do?”

“Nothing. I am just being cautious.” Talone stood and approached Ungolad’s group. The frivolity died down, and soon the party broke up. Talone assigned the watches that night to his most trusted men, but Ani hardly slept. She clutched the handkerchief at her breast.

The next morning dawned a bright, stinging sun. The company rode in a long line up next to the trees, hoping for a forest breeze or the occasional branch of shade. By the time they stopped to camp two hours from sundown, everyone was sick from the heat and headachy from squinting in the sun. The evening was warm and stale under the heavy-limbed canopies, and the air was sticky with the odor of pine, seemingly too thick to breathe.

There was a small clearing just off the road where the company set up camp. Ani, prodded by Falada’s grumbling of thirst, tossed off her pack and walked Falada through a thicket of trees toward the sounds of a stream. She dismounted, threw off her sweat-soaked sun hat, and bent over to fill her

gold cup. As she dipped the cup under, the cold water against her heated skin shocked her, and she dropped it. The gold winked green through the water before the current pulled it down and away. She thought, *One less thing to separate me from everyone else*, and lay down on her stomach, scooping the water with her hands to her lips. Her sleeves to her elbows soaked through, and she felt the cold water on her neck and on her chest. She shivered and drank.

Princess, you lost something in the river, said Falada at her side.

Yes, my cup, she said.

Princess, said Falada again.

But a shout came from the camp, and Ani stood and turned away.

Something is happening, she said.

She could still hear the echo of Falada's last word to her—*Princess*. But she walked away, toward the camp and the commotion. Embarrassed that the breast of her dress was soaked through, Ani decided to slip behind a copse of trees that separated her from the party and avoid being seen. Through a break in the leaves, she spied on the camp. Yulan was shouting. He had removed his shirt in the heat. Talone stood by. His hand rested on his side just above his sword hilt.

Trouble. Ani glanced back to Falada, who was still drinking at the river, and felt uneasy at being so far separated from him. But she reasoned there could not be any real danger or she would have a warning. She touched her chest where she kept the handkerchief and, prodded by curiosity, crept through the trees to get close enough to hear but still stay cautiously out of sight.

"While there are ladies in this camp, Yulan, you will stay dressed like a gentleman," Talone said.

"Selia does not mind, do you, lady?" said a guard by Yulan's side, and there was laughter.

"Let them be, Captain," Ani heard Selia say, though she could not see her.

"I amend my statement, then." He spoke through a clenched jaw. "While there is one lady in this camp, you will dress, and behave, like gentlemen. We are the royal guard of the princess, and we will act as such."

"Royal guard of the princess," said Terne, laughing. "She is not a princess, not here. Kildenree doesn't claim her, and we haven't reached Bayern yet."

Talone ignored Terne. “As captain of the guard, Yulan, those are my orders, and to disobey them is treason.”

The pocket of men backing up Yulan shifted uneasily. Yulan looked at Ungolad, who was sitting on a log a few paces away.

“Nice and easy, lads.” Ungolad stood. “This was not the way to do things, but I think at last the time has come to tell the truth.”

“Not now,” said Selia.

Ungolad winked at her. “Don’t worry, my lady.” He looked at Talone and squinted, though Ani was not sure if it was for effect or just habit from the blazing day. “We don’t want a fight, but some things are going to change.”

“Yes, all hail Princess Selia,” said Yulan.

“Princess Selia!” Several men shouted and raised their swords above their heads.

“Hush up,” said Ungolad. He spoke with genuine anger.

Talone stepped closer to Ungolad. That Ani could see, they were the only two who had not drawn their swords. Both sides were poised, waiting for action from their leaders.

“Is that what this is about, mercenary?” Talone did not seem aware that he was shaking his head. “You’re aiming to dispose of a rightful princess and replace her with a fraud?”

Ani clutched at a branch to keep steady. Dispose of a princess. A fraud. They were trying to kill her. Until that moment she had never really believed it. Why would they try to kill her? So Selia could be princess. She remembered Talone’s order that she run at the first sign of trouble. *But there’s still no warning*, she thought. *My mother’s handkerchief will protect me.*

All the same, she thought she had better get closer to Falada. She spoke his name, but he was a long way off grazing at the river and did not respond. Slowly, so that she would not cause a noise, she started to make her way to him.

“Fraud?” said Selia. “Royalty is not a right, Captain. The willingness of the people to follow a ruler is what gives her power. Here, in this place, by this people, I have been chosen. These men are tired of being told whom to follow. Now they have a choice, and they use that choice to call me Princess.”

Selia’s words seemed seductively convincing. Even Ani, peering through pine boughs, had to stop herself from nodding. But Adon stepped up beside

Talone and challenged her.

"You mean Princess Anidori-Kiladra, don't you? You want to take not only the title, but the name—her name."

"I suppose, my little warrior pup, but it's the title that interests me most."

Ani caught a glimpse of Ungolad smiling at Selia. A couple of men near Talone chuckled at the idea of Selia being a princess, but the other half was stiffly serious, and the laugh fell like water against a stone wall.

Falada, she said again. He did not respond.

"You're mad." Talone spoke the words as though they were the final revelation.

"If we're mad," Ungolad said, "then we are mad in large numbers, at least larger than yours."

"Where is she?" said Selia. Ani covered her mouth before she gasped. They would look for her now. They would kill her as they had been trying since the waterfall. Why didn't the handkerchief protect her, whisper to her through birds or nudge her to safety?

"She's by the stream," someone said. Ani could see Terne, one of Ungolad's men, running from the group and toward the area where Falada grazed. Terne was already between her and her horse. Her cold fingers fumbled at the wet fabric at her breast where the handkerchief had been. Where it should be. Ani felt for it, patted her dress, looked at the ground around her feet. It was gone. She realized that she must have lost it in the stream. It would be far away by now. Who would protect her?

Falada, can you come to me? she said. He did not respond.

Talone shouted toward where Falada stood. "Princess, do as I told you!"

Ungolad motioned for another soldier to follow the first toward the stream. *Do as I told you*, he had said. *Run away.* Unable to reach Falada without being seen, Ani turned to the dim forest and walked softly, afraid to hear fir needles crack beneath her feet, afraid if she did run on her shaking legs, she would fall. *Just a little farther*, she thought, *get to the next copse, and then run.*

"There she is," said Selia.

Ani looked back. Hul left Ungolad's side and jogged toward her. Adon shouted and started forward to rush him. He had taken only one step when a bloody sword point burst through the center of his chest. His face ripped in pain and then stilled, dead standing. Ishta pulled his sword out of the dead

man's back and grinned with his animal teeth. Ani gasped, and suddenly everything felt terribly real. She tripped, turned, and ran.

There was the din of sword meeting sword behind her and horses screaming and men shouting and men falling. She ran. She tripped past a thornbush, and her hair caught in its barbed arms. She pulled herself free. A man was close to her. It was Ungolad, now, running after her, running faster than she. She could hear the thumps of his boots against the hollow forest floor like an anxious heartbeat behind her. He was getting closer.

Falada, she said, *Falada, please*. He was too far away, or perhaps he was already killed. "Falada!"

She heard Ungolad grunt and turned to see him trip on one of the roots that ribbed their path. There was a pounding of hooves to her right. It was Radal's dun-colored horse, riderless, cantering, and dragging his reins. A long, shallow cut marked its rump. Ani ran to him.

The horse stopped when his path was blocked by a thicket of firs and startled when Ani grabbed his reins. The reins were unknotted, and she managed to grab only one when she mounted. She leaned over his neck to grab the other rein. At once Ungolad reached her, and he growled when he sprang. Ani kicked the horse. He lurched forward as Ungolad grabbed her heel. Ani pulled tight on the reins and held to his mane to stay in the saddle. The horse reared, and Ungolad's grip loosened. She clamped her knees around his middle. When the horse's forelegs touched ground again, he bounded into a gallop.

Part Two



Goose Girl

Chapter 5

Ani rode. She did not see the trees that dashed by her and the branches that moved like executioner axes just above her ducking head. There was no purpose to the direction the horse ran—except away. For all she knew, she could be riding a circle, and suddenly she would see the campsite before her and leap the horse over slain guards and dodge the survivors' grasping hands. Whenever the horse showed signs of slowing down, Ani spurred him on with a hard heel, expecting at any moment to hear the rhythmic thuds of Ungolad's bay close behind her. Sometimes she thought she saw yellow braids in her periphery.

She rode hard, and the horse's neck was matted with sweat. At each beat of his heavy gallop, a bit of foam fell from his mouth. The reins were wet from her hands, so she clutched at his mane. The grip of her legs loosened, and when his hooves met turf she came down hard in the saddle. When a low branch struck her shoulder, she was knocked easily from the saddle and did not realize that she was on the ground until the horse had galloped away without her.

She sat still for a long time, breathing. If Ungolad was still following, he would just have to find her and kill her quickly, for she could not move. She thought she heard a twig snap as though it cracked under a foot, and she sprang to her feet to run, but her first step brought her hard back to the earth. She lay still, hugging the ground and waiting for her doom.

Ani awoke much later and realized that she was cold, that she had fir needles piercing her cheek, and that she was confused.

Falada, she said.

She bolted upright. The forest was so dark, she knew that her eyes were open only from the sensation of blinking. An owl hooted, and she jumped. It hooted again, and she wrapped her arms around her chest and tried to think. She must have been asleep, but before that? She was running. She sought to remember more and saw Adon rushing forward to protect her and a bloody sword tip parting his chest. She shivered and lay down again, covering her face with her arms, and tried to sleep away the darkness.

At dawn Ani began to walk. The forest looked the same in every direction, and she realized that she could be just a few leagues from a town

and yet wander the woods for days. The canopy-dimmed sunlight gave little indication of direction, so she chose what she hoped was east and strode forward.

Her stomach ached with hunger; she had never before, in her life of white marble and breakfast trays, missed a meal. But mostly she was so thirsty that she began to contemplate digging down to the tree roots to see if she could discover what they were drinking.

Hours later, Ani heard water and thought it perhaps the loveliest noise in all creation. The sound echoed off many tree trunks and confused her senses until she finally found the stream by stepping into it. She drank from the stream until her belly warned of bursting and then walked beside it, reasoning that it must run away from the mountains and so would meet the road. The road meant direction.

Ani chased the stream for two days, only leaving its banks a short distance to search for mushrooms. She ate them tentatively, relying on dim childhood memories of her aunt's brief lessons in edible plants. Some wild onions grew in the wet black soil on the stream bank, and she bit into them raw, her mouth burning and eyes tearing from their fierce flavor.

On the third day, the stream stopped. It had thinned from waist width to a drizzle thin as a water snake and finally stopped in a green pond ringed with cattails. Ani circled the pond hoping for an outlet, then leaned against a tree and thought about crying. She did not know where she was, she had no skin to carry water in, and she had no stream to walk beside. She stayed the remainder of that day and the whole of the night beside the last bit of running stream. Thirst thrust into her dreams, coupled with the sounds of Ungolad's heavy boots running behind her. She woke with a beating heart at every hoot of an owl.

In the morning, Ani sat awhile near the stream, playing the water through her fingers. *I wonder*, she thought, *if this creek ever touched the stream where I lost my handkerchief. If I hadn't lost that, none of this would have happened*. No sooner had she thought it than the idea was completely ridiculous, a bed-tale, a lie. She almost laughed at herself, but the laugh pulled tight in her chest and threatened to tug loose a tear before she stopped it. *I thought it was magic. I thought I was so safe. A bird warned me by the waterfall. And Falada. And my own weak reason*. She shook her head and beat her fist once against her chest. *It was I who stood up to Selia, and*

it was I who didn't run soon enough, not soon enough for Adon or Talone, or Falada.

She leaned her head back to stop the tears from coming again and saw a brown owl in the pine opposite her, looking out at the morning with glassy yellow eyes.

"Are you the one that kept waking me up?" she whispered. "I don't know why your silly hooting makes me shiver at night. You look harmless enough."

She had once known the way to speak to the owls that kept watch in the stable rafters. It was long ago, and the memory awakened in her the empty confusion of homesickness. She brushed it away with an experimental hoot. The owl gave no reaction. *If only he were a swan*, she thought. Bird speech was all one language to her, yet with many different dialects, some more distinct than others, and it was swan she remembered best.

She tried her greeting again, and his head turned slightly toward her, recognizing her presence for the first time. After a few blinkless moments he greeted her, and she leaned back on her hands with tired hope. Ani followed with a question about how he was eating, a polite sort of conversation among owls, and he said nice warm mice. She wanted to ask him directions out of the forest and stumbled on how to phrase it.

Where is the place where the trees end? she said.

The owl did not know or did not understand. Perhaps he would know a place where people lived, but she had no idea how to ask about streets or buildings.

Where is the place where there is smoke?

One flight against the morning sun, he said. Then he flew from his tree to another, and then another, creating a straight line in that direction. Ani thanked him, took a long drink from the stream, and set off, praying that one flight was no farther than one day's walk.

Ani labored to keep her course straight, focusing on one tree in the distance until she reached it and then picking another farther on. The work made her eyes sore. The air was stagnant and hung close to her skin, but the ground was dry, giving no sign of spring or stream.

At first, she did not see the house. The walls were made of rough wood, and the roof was laden with branches still green with needles. Beside it stood a small garden enclosed with a stick fence. Ani noticed ripe apples on the trees and the lovely green fronds and orange tops of carrots pushing up

through the earth. Her stomach made a noise. A brown goat was tied to a post outside the garden. It turned to her and said, "Neeee," in an annoyed stutter.

"What do you see, Poppo?" A woman came around the side of the house. She wore a red scarf tied on top of her head, a long tunic, and a skirt that hit above her ankles made of sturdy blue cloth. She spotted Ani and frowned.

"Well, Poppo, this isn't a badger or wolf, though it might want to eat from my garden like a common hare." The woman's short-voweled, guttural accent reminded Ani that she was in or near Bayern. Ani cleared her throat. The woman waited for her to speak.

"Hello," said Ani. She had spoken little in days, and her voice came through her throat like a fist. She cleared her throat again.

"Hmm?" said the woman.

"Hello. I'm lost."

"Yes, I see that." The woman folded her arms and looked over Ani's ragged, filthy dress. She blinked her eyes, waiting for more information. "It might help to know where you're lost from, or where you're lost to, if you see my point, and then I could push you in the right direction."

Ani opened her mouth and then closed it. *I am, or was, crown princess of Kildenree, betrothed to your king's son, what-is-his-name, I can't remember, oh mercy, and half of my escort guard attacked the other half of my escort guard and attempted to murder me and replace me with my lady-in-waiting.* It sounded absurd in her head. She began to wish for the comfort of the handkerchief in her bodice and reminded herself that she did not have it, and even if she did, it would do no good, and now she had to learn to rely on herself. That thought scared her as much as being lost in a strange forest.

"Well, child, I'm waiting," said the woman.

Ani realized that she was extremely thirsty, that it had been hours since she had left her little stream, and that she was likely to faint from panic, hunger, and exhaustion. And as she thought that, thousands of tiny black dots rushed her eyesight until, thankfully, the woman, the house, and the goat were exchanged for darkness.

Ani woke to a cottage window that looked out with a black eye on the night. She realized with a comfortable sigh that she was indoors and lying on a hay-stuffed mattress.

"You're awake, then?"

The woman had removed her headscarf, and Ani could see she wore her thick black hair cropped to her shoulders. She was sitting on a stool and knitting by the light of the hearth fire.

"You might've told me that you were thirsty and saved my boy Finn the trouble of carrying you in. I suspect you fainted on purpose just to get inside my house and onto a bed. Hmph." Ani smiled politely because she believed the woman meant it as a joke. "I guess you may as well stay the night."

She continued to knit, and Ani watched the yarn pile up in knotted lines, back and forth, with a speed she had never witnessed before. The woman nodded her head to a dish at her feet full of carrot broth and a ceramic mug of water. Ani drank quickly and then ate in silence. She could feel the water and broth go through her chest and into her belly with a warm tingle.

"So, girl," said the woman after a few minutes, "tell me what you're about."

"I was lost in the forest and need to get back to the road or on to Bayern." As she spoke, Ani was mindful of the long vowels and distinct consonants of her Kildenrean accent and wished she had thought to try to imitate the Bayern way of speaking. She thought she could learn it easily enough in the same way she had first learned to imitate the sounds of the swans, but now it was too late to try with this woman.

The woman laid her knitting down in her lap in a gesture of folding one's hands and looked carefully at Ani. "You're not from here," she said. Ani shook her head. "You're in some kind of trouble?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, I don't want to hear about it," she said quickly. "The less I know, the happier I'll be, I'd say. By the look of you, there's some mischief afoot. You've got yellow hair. And long, isn't it? Too long to be a wandering field-worker. Obviously not from Bayern, obviously noble, look at your soft little hands." Ani tucked her hands into each other. "And, your accent, tsk, child, you sum up to a problem, and I've got knitting to do and pullovers to sell by marketweek. You understand?"

Ani nodded.

"Why don't you speak more?" The woman leaned forward, waiting for an answer.

"I am embarrassed about my accent," said Ani, "and I'm so confused . . . I don't know what to . . . " Ani heaved a breath but could not stop the first

sob, which was followed by another and a third. Her stomach tightened, and she bent over and cried hard. Her hair closed in around her face. She felt the woman pat her shoulder.

"There, there, now. No more crying. It's all wetness and no comfort at all."

Ani thought she was right, for she felt more miserable than before, so she put her palms over her eyes and tried to stop. Her breath pulled harshly at her throat, and she sounded to herself like little Rianno-Hancery after a tantrum.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I won't cry anymore. I'm sorry."

"All right, child, all right. Now, just you tell me what I can do to set you straight, provided I don't have to get involved."

Ani nodded and then realized that the woman was asking her to make a decision. She longed for Talone, her father, Selia (no, no, not Selia), Falada, the lost handkerchief (not that either), just one of her onetime advisers. *What a child I am*, she thought. She straightened her back, placed her hands in her lap, and stared at the fire. Even from a distance, its heat burned her eyes.

Grow up. Think. What did she need? The road. But the road to where? The thought of going back to Kildenree on her own was absurd. She had no food or means, no horse, and on foot it would take her months, and the snows would arrive before then. Talone had told her to go to Bayern and find the king. It was possible that Talone and his men had defeated Ungolad, and if so, they would be with the king. Besides the king, there was the prime minister. She had met him once as a child—perhaps he would remember her face and act as her witness. And if Selia and her traitors were there waiting for the escaped princess? She could hear her heartbeat escape her ribs like the quick thuds of Ungolad's boots behind her.

Even so, were she offered a carriage back to Kildenree, passage paid, she could not go until she had found Falada and learned the fate of Talone and those faithful few. Bayern. It had to be her choice.

"How far away is the capital?"

"A day and a half in a wagon, but don't you be thinking about walking it and losing yourself again in our forest until I find you facedown in my carrot patch a week hence with no more sense than you had when you left."

"May I go with you to the city for marketweek?"

The woman considered. “Yes, that’ll do, and I’ll expect you’ll be wanting an oufit so you don’t stick out like a lightning tree. Finn’ll take you come next week’s end, and then we’ll be done.” She nodded and picked up her knitting.

A boy in late adolescence entered the house and stepped up to the hearth to kiss his mother. The firelight lit up bits of white wool that were stuck to his sleeves and the hairs of his arms. He stuck out a hand to Ani and said, “Hello.”

“Hello, Finn,” said Ani.

The boy smiled and disappeared into a dark corner where his bed resided.

“Go to sleep now,” said the woman, rising.

“Yes, um, lady?”

“Gilsa,” said the woman. “I’m no lady.”

“Gilsa, when is next week’s end?”

“Eight days. Hmpf, child.”

Ani lay on her side, watching the black logs throb orange with the last life of the fire and thinking that she would never fall asleep. It seemed only the next moment that she opened her eyes to a room already silvery with dawn. The door opened and Gilsa came in with a handful of eggs, her hair uncombed and stuck with bits of hay and wisps of wool.

“Oh,” said Ani, sitting upright, “this is your bed.”

“Well, of course it is. Do you think I sleep in the shed every night?”

“I didn’t think at all.” Ani stood and smoothed the blankets over the pillow. She had never had to wonder where other people slept. In a palace, everyone had a place. In her ignorance, she realized, she was thoughtless and selfish.

“I’m sorry,” said Ani. “Thank you. You don’t have to sleep out there tonight.”

“That’s certain. My charity lasts about one night on thin hay and then I get tetchy.”

Ani resolved that for the rest of her stay she would not be a burden. The first day, while Gilsa knit ferociously on her stool, Ani tried her hand at preparing the noon meal. After the questionable results were painfully consumed, Finn returned to the cooking and Ani, chagrined, observed carefully.

Gilsa discovered that Ani was quite good at finding the roots she needed for dyeing the yarn. Soon Ani was sent more and more on errands in the

woods to keep her away, Ani suspected, from the delicate work. After one such errand, Ani made her way across the neat, dirt-swept yard with an apron full of roots when she heard the chickens croaking uncomfortably in their coop. Small feathers took flight as they left and reentered the pen again and again.

A rat, a rat, they croaked. *We will not stay, the rat stays still, there, under, under.*

"I don't know what's the matter," said Gilsa, her hand on the coop door. "They're scared, as if there's a green snake in a nest or a fox underfoot. But I've cleaned out the coop twice and can't find a thing."

"A rat," said Ani. "A dead rat, under the floor, and the hens sense him."

Ani took the roots inside and was sorting them before she realized she might have to explain her comment. When she stepped back outside, Gilsa was directing Finn to remove the floorboard Ani had indicated. Underneath was a newly dead rat corpse.

"How did you . . . ?" Gilsa looked at her sharply.

"My parents used to raise chickens," said Ani.

After the first night, Ani spent the sleeping hours on the itchy wool and hay in the shed. She was restless at first, waking at every creak of board and whine of tree. Could Ungolad track her here? She did not know, but after her first night in the shed, Ani begged a board to lock herself in from the inside. Finn complied without asking questions.

The night before their departure, Ani sat by the fire, rolling up Gilsa's pullovers into tight bundles and fitting them into the packs. Finn prepared the travel food. Gilsa was finishing the sleeve of one last pullover, a vibrant orange with suns and birds floating on its breast and back. She hummed a tune, light and sleepy, a lullaby. It tugged at the lip of Ani's memory, and she stopped her packing and watched the singer.

"You aren't done yet," said Gilsa.

"I know that song. Does it have words here? Do you say, 'The tales that trees could tell, the stories wind would sing'?"

"'Hear the trees a-listening, feel the fire whispering. See the wind a-telling me all the forest dreams.' It's an old tune. I used to sing it to my boy."

"What does it mean?" said Ani.

Gilsa's metal needles clicked together, a sound like a strange beast feeding. "It talks about the old tales, I guess. How in faraway places there

are people what talk to things not people, but to the wind and trees and such. ‘The falcon hears the boar, the child speaks to spring.’ And to animals, too, I gather. I’ve always wondered.” Gilsa looked down her nose at Ani. “Is it possible? Would you know about such things, child?”

Ani continued packing. “It may be so. I . . . have heard tales about the times after creation when all the languages were known, and tales of people who still remember how to talk to the beasts. But about wind and trees and spring and all that, I thought it was just a nursery story.”

“May be. But all things speak, in their way, don’t they?”

“I suppose. Just not very clearly.”

Gilsa looked narrowly at Ani as though at a troublesome child. “We all talk to something besides just ourselves, from time to time. I talk to my goat and my chickens and my apple tree. I don’t know if I’m heard, and I don’t think I’ve been answered back, but it can’t hurt. Now, just think of this, that a person could talk to fire or to a goat and the fire and the goat could answer back. How would that be?”

“Are there such things in Bayern? Magic things?”

“Magicians, sorcerers, witches,” said Finn. He rocked back on his stool, and it creaked.

“Tricks is what they do, boy,” said Gilsa. “That’s not what she means.”

“I’ve seen them,” Finn said softly, “in the market. A witch can look at you and say what ails you, and a sorcerer can make things into what they’re not.”

“Yes, yes, child.” Gilsa waved a dismissive hand. “They’ve some kind of gift for seeing and showing, but it’s all flashy and comedy and giving a coin to hear what you already know. She’s talking about the old ways, aren’t you, little one?”

“I think so. There are so many tales, so strange and beautiful and perfect. They are not what are real, but better. I thought I had something that was magic once, but I lost it, and now I don’t think it was at all.” She touched her chest where the handkerchief had been and frowned. “I wish there was magic. If all the tales were true, then maybe they could tell me what I’m doing, and what I am to do now.”

“Ah, now, don’t cry over lost years and forgetfulness. The tales tell what they can. The rest is for us to learn. The question is, are we smart enough to figure for ourselves? Now, that’s what I’d like to know.”

Ani did not respond. There was a thin wail of a wind caught in the chimney. For a moment the sound was stronger than the crackle of the fire, as sad as a broken bird.

Chapter 6

Early the next morning, Ani was arrayed in a yellow tunic and sky blue wool skirt. She wore a pair of Finn's old boots, the soft leather laced tightly to her calves. When Gilsa told Ani that no Bayern was as fair as she, Ani requested a cloth like the one Gilsa wore to hide her long yellow hair. Disguised as a Bayern, Ani thought she had a better chance of getting to the king before being noticed by Ungolad's men. After she was safely in the king's presence, it would be simple enough to remove the headscarf and show her hair as proof of her heritage.

Gilsa finished knotting the scarf against Ani's forehead and patted her cheek as she might the goat's neck after a milking.

"These are your clothes," said Ani.

"They were," said Gilsa.

Ani slipped the remaining gold ring from her pinkie. "I would like to repay your kindness. I would like you to have the ring."

Gilsa looked down at the twinkling bit of gold.

"Now what would I do with that, pierce Poppo's nose?" She smiled, and Ani realized she had not known the woman could smile. "You may need that, my precious, before your road's won. You'll find some other way to repay me, that's certain."

Ani had little practice in arguing, and she put the ring back on, disappointed. She felt the burden of the food she had eaten and the night she had slept in Gilsa's bed.

It was still early when Finn and Ani shouldered their packs and set out, and the forest was wet and humming in the morning blueness before true dawn. Finn seemed pleased to be silent, so Ani walked for a league listening to the heartening prattle of the forest birds and to her own breath that became heavier and shorter the farther they strode. By the time Finn motioned that they stop for a rest, Ani suspected the weight of the pack had rubbed the skin from her shoulders completely off.

They halted again later that afternoon where their path merged into a green way pressed with wheel ruts. The trees there thinned into lighter woods. Ani looked back and surprised herself with a longing to stay in the true forest. Gilsa's house, small and lost in a ponderous ocean of trees,

seemed more like a home than all her memories of her mother's palace. She found that she had little desire to return to that palace, except for the comfort of a bed and food and knowing her place. *But*, she reminded herself, *Kildenree is no longer my place. Nor is Gilsa's house*. She looked back to the road.

Through the whispering forest noises came the distinct sound of a horse's hooves. Finn stood up, straining his eyes down the road, and Ani backed away to a tight group of trees. Her heart quickened her breath, and she did not dare even call out to Finn. But when she listened to the clomp and rhythm of the hooves, she realized that this was a horse with a short gait, and alone, not likely one of her pursuers. When the brown nose of a cob rounded the corner, there was recognition on Finn's face.

"Hello, hello," said the driver, a boy younger than Finn. In the wagon sat another boy and a girl, her hair wrapped up in a red scarf. All their clothing was dyed in bright colors like Ani's, for which she was relieved, having felt quite loud in her bright yellow and blue among the simple green and brown of the forest. The wagon halted beside them, and the rider stood up. Ani touched her head and made certain the headscarf was pulled low over her light brows.

"Hello," said the driver. "Finn, who's she?"

"Mother sent her to help me at market," said Finn. The others looked at her, waiting. Ani had decided to use her grandmother's name until she was sure she was safe from Ungolad, but there in the woods before that weather-beaten wagon, Isilee seemed too grand.

"I'm Isi," said Ani. "It's nice to meet you."

Finn turned and looked at her. Ani had spoken with the quick vowels and smooth slurring of the Bayern accent, practiced for days while hunched over hunting for roots near Gilsa's house. Finn frowned but said nothing, and she smiled at him gratefully.

The wagon riders continued to stare.

"Well, hand me a rotten apple," said the driver.

"What's all this?" said the other boy. "She sounds like she's from around Darkpond, but she's not from around Darkpond, or we'd know her, you hear me, Finn?"

"Yeah, you'd best tell where she came from."

"Forest," said Finn.

The driver shook his head. “Well, I don’t like it, and neither does Nod, and Nod’s not used to pulling five, and we’re not used to cozying up to strangers. We can take her pack in the wagon now, so she’s useless to you, and I think she’d best be on her way.”

Ani was not surprised. She waited to feel her shoulders lighten as Finn lifted the pack from her back and to be left alone in the woods that she was beginning to know.

Finn said, “All right, then,” touched Ani’s elbow, and began to walk down the road.

“You can go with them,” Ani said softly. “I don’t mind, Finn, and you can’t miss marketday.”

Finn shrugged and kept walking. Ani could hear the groan of the wagon as Nod pulled up beside them at a slow pace.

“Don’t be stubborn, Finn,” said the driver.

“Yes, get in, Gilsa-boy.”

“Look now, you dolts,” said the girl, “Finn’s sure to be carrying a seedcake from Gilsa, and we can’t get a crumb of it like this.”

“Come on, Finn,” said the boy, “we just want to know who she is.”

Finn kept his pace. The driver reined and groaned.

“Get in, both of you, you goat brothers.”

She and Finn clambered into the back of the wagon. There was little room, the large sacks taking up the floor space. Ani followed Finn’s lead and sat on her sack, like children winning individual games of king-of-the-hill.

Finn reached into his pack and pulled out a small cake wrapped in a scrap of basket weave.

“Fresh yesterday,” said Finn, and handed it to the girl to split. Ani smiled at her, sure she had made the protest from kindness, but the girl did not meet her eyes.

“Go on, Nod,” said the driver. He looked askance at Finn and tapped the horse with the reins.

They rode at a horse walk well into night. Ani curled onto her pack of blankets and watched the clean brightness of trees in open places slowly slide by. The three neighbors chatted regularly and even managed to coax updates out of Finn. He admitted he was worried about a chick that was born with a marred foot and his mother, who often knit in too little light.

As they told stories of what had passed at home since last marketweek, Ani listened and tried to piece together what life must be like living in the Forest on the edge of Bayern—difficult, impoverished, backbreaking work and the persistent question if they would last through another winter, she guessed. But she envied their commonality.

She had no stories to share and did not speak, and the four did not speak to her. Ani curled up tighter on her pack and tried to take up as little room as possible.

The wagon stopped for the night near a blackened fire pit that was soon ablaze.

As the travelers prepared a group meal and set up their bedrolls, Ani thought to be grateful for the second half of her Forest journey when Selia had refused to help her. At least she had had some practice at setting up her own bedroll. Finn, aware of Ani's ineptitude with meals, quickly fixed hers along with his and saved her a small embarrassment. Ani thanked him in her Bayern accent.

The next morning, Ani awoke before the others. She looked at their faces in the pale hint of dawn and felt acutely alone. In sleep, even the relative familiarity of Finn's face was dulled. They seemed complete strangers, their dark hair, their work-shortened fingernails and dirty hands, their peaceful sleep noises assuring they felt at rest in this great wooded world.

She rose and stretched, pulling even tighter that tension of solitude that was strung inside her chest. The horse whinnied sleepily. The sound was like a wound awakened, and she hungered for Falada's company. The horse's brushes and fittings stood on a rock by his side, and she set to work on his dull brown coat.

Ani whispered as she brushed, hummed softly at his twitching ears, imitating the nickering of mares to their foals, and tried to sense where he most liked to be rubbed. Though she could not speak to this horse, though his words did not enter her head as Falada's had, his flesh was familiar beneath her fingers, and his movements made sense to her eyes.

"Nod seems to like you."

Ani started and turned to see the driver yawn and rub his eyes. He reached out to pat his horse's neck. "So tell, then, you're good with the beasts?"

"I think so." She did not know how the Bayern looked upon those who were able with animals, but the boy did not seem suspicious.

He patted Nod's rump. "Finish getting him ready, if you like."

The companions rose and breakfasted in sluggish silence. As the others clambered into the wagon, Ani picked up a cooled piece of charcoal from the fire pit and slipped it into her skirt pocket, reasoning it might work to darken her eyebrows and complete her disguise as a Bayern.

They traveled for most of the day. The landscape opened up ever wider. After the sun began its slide into the west, the small party rambled in the company of hundreds of wagons down a broad avenue. Ahead rose the city.

Outside the forest, Bayern was a land of surging hills and rising lowlands, and the capital was built on the grandest of hills, sloping upward gently. Surrounded by a wall five men high, it ascended into tall, narrow houses and winding streets and towers and many spires, the city a tremendous candled cake ablaze with red-tiled roofs. All the grandeur met at the peak, where stood the many-turreted palace, red-and-orange banners worried by a high wind like candle flames. Next to this, her mother's illustrious palace was a country estate.

Ani jumped and stared at the noise and colors, a sea of hatted and scarf-wrapped heads, faces marked with dark brows and lashes, soldiers bearing iron-tipped javelins and brightly painted shields.

One among them had fair hair.

She saw him before he saw her, and she quickly looked away. It was Yulan. He sat on a stone before the city wall, scanning every face carefully, his eyes squinting against the setting sun, one hand on his sword hilt.

Ani lowered herself off her bundle and sat on the floor of the wagon. Her heart beat in her ears now, and the din of wagons and people seemed small and far away. Yulan was in the city. Ungolad and Selia must be there, too. She wondered if this meant that they had defeated Talone. That they were all dead. That there was no safety. She rubbed the tightness in her neck and kept her head down.

Somehow she still had to get into the palace. In Kildenree there had been days when one of the royal family would see city supplicants, and Ani was praying for the same here. If only she could get inside the palace without being recognized by Yulan and the others, she could plead her case to the king, and if he did not believe her, then the prime minister. She hoped that more than five years after visiting Kildenree, he might still recognize her face.

The many wagons poured through the gates and lined the open expanse of the market-square. Finn's company was pushed up against the back of a three-story building facing the market. Ani set up her bedroll behind a wagon wheel and huddled there, waiting for night to hide her. Finn sat beside her and silently offered bread and cheese the others were sharing for supper.

"Finn, can one go and talk to the king or queen, or prince?"

"No queen anymore." He slowly chewed a bit of bread, unaware that her skin crept with cold while she waited for his response.

"On marketday I see people line up to talk to the king."

"That's tomorrow?"

He nodded. They ate in silence.

"You'll be wanting to leave early." He pointed to a slender street that left the market and led up.

In the gray morning, Ani awoke to a market of sleepy merchants pulling wraps and blankets and wood-carved boxes out of dewy bags. She folded her blankets, nodded farewell to Finn, and started up the street.

Not far into her walk, Ani stopped on a vacant side street and arranged the front of her head cloth at its natural place just below her hairline. She pulled the charcoal from her pocket, bent to her reflection in a curtained window, and delicately darkened her eyebrows to a dusty black. If the Kildenreans were scanning the crowds for a fair-haired girl, they might pass her over. Ani could not afford to be recognized before reaching the protection of the king. She had no doubt that, if given the chance, Ungolad would drag her off and slit her throat in private.

The farther she walked, the more people were walking with her, some in the brightly colored, simple clothing of the out-towns, others in finer stuff of the city. She arrived at the palace walls just as the sun glared its upper rim over the city wall. There was already a queue of petitioners winding its way from the high palace gates through the courtyard. She stepped in behind the last person and hoped she was blending in enough not to draw the attention of the likes of Yulan.

The line moved quickly, though it was long, and Ani soon found herself wishing she had thought to bring along a shred of breakfast from Gilsa's bag of food. The bite of hunger made her grumpy, and her thoughts grumbled, *Unfair, unfair. To have to eat out of others' foodstuff and hope for goodness and charity, to be coinless and placeless. This palace would have*

been my home. She bent her neck back to stare up at the sheer height of the palace spires, each glittering with windows and a wind-nipped banner.

She glared down at herself, leaning against the wall in travel-crumpled clothing, nearly last in a line of patient peasants, hungry, with feet aching on the soft soles of Finn's boots. *This is not who I am*, she thought. *So who am I?* She did not answer her own question. Her mind was filling with thoughts of breakfast foods—molasses rolls, cooked apples, boiled eggs with cheese, nut breads, fresh sausages. She swallowed against her hollow stomach and waited. The line inched forward.

At last her end of the line reached the cool shadow of the palace doors. Ani stepped forward and felt herself nearly knocked over with royal smell. Her stomach turned about as though it would jump into her neck and choke her until she cried. Floor soap, floor wax, curtain perfume, old metal, expensive stone, drinking water, garden roses, mending paste, armor oil, skin soap, rosewater. A kingdom of smells poked at her memories of her father, and of being comfortable and clean. Just a few months had passed since she had left home, but the smells came at her as though from far away, an echo of a memory, like being reminded of a dead loved one in the face of a stranger.

She barely noticed stepping forward each time the line moved, absorbed in a reverie of memories. The man before her had just entered the king's chamber when Ani saw Selia.

Chapter 7

Selia's pale hair was striking among the dark heads, and she wore it up in a cap of curls tucked into a jeweled net. She was dressed in one of Ani's new gowns, the rust-colored one with the simple bodice. She strolled with slow confidence, so pleased with herself that she almost betrayed smugness, accompanied by two other women in attire of the Bayern fashion—long-sleeved tunics and wide skirts cut from separate cloth. They laughed.

Ani did not move. Her feet were heavy cobblestones. She bowed her head and tensed herself for discovery, listening to the soft sway of Selia's skirts, the rustling of claimants as they moved aside and guessed at bowing. When the women turned down another corridor, Ani looked up to see the chamber-mistress motioning for her to enter.

Selia is here, in the palace, in my dress.

"Come, you're next," said the chamber-mistress.

Selia is here, and that means she has killed them all—Talone, Adon, Dano, Radal, Ingras, all.

"Step quickly, girl, as there's a line until tomorrow."

Ani held her breath and entered the chamber. It was long and narrow, with a window in the ceiling that poured hot sunlight onto the pale marble floor. Ani wanted to squint at the brilliance. The image of Selia still burned in her eyes, like looking into darkness after staring at fire, and she walked forward blindly.

She knew there were guards in the corners and beside each bright column. She did not raise her eyes to them. Ungolad would be somewhere close to Selia. His men were in the city looking for her, and here she had come to the palace, a mouse to the cheese, to announce herself before them, inviting them to simply murder her like her companions. Ani stopped, afraid that if she continued moving, she would run away.

"Come closer," said the king.

He was a wide man who seemed tall, even sitting. His hands, resting on the arms of the finely carved chair, were large and strong, and she imagined that if he had the need, he could still carry a sword to battle. He seemed tired but amused, perhaps by her reluctance to approach. Ani took a few more painful steps forward and performed her deepest curtsy, the one her

tutor years ago had told her was for royalty only. No tutor could have prepared her for meeting a king no longer as Anidori-Kiladra of Kildenree, but as a forest girl in hand-me-down boy's boots, charcoal-darkened eyebrows, and an imitated accent.

"What's your petition?" said the chamber-mistress.

"I—don't know," she said, using the strong Forest accent. *Stupid, stupid*, she called herself. She could not reveal herself to the king now that she knew Selia had succeeded in penetrating the palace. What proof did she have? At her claim, the king would naturally call Selia to explain. Selia and all the guards could deny her story, and Ani would be imprisoned as an impostor or, perhaps worse, let go as a harmless nitwit and fall directly into Ungolad's hands. There was no appeal. Ani was lost.

The king sighed. "You're new to the city?"

"Yes, sire."

"You have a place to stay?"

"No," she admitted.

"What can you do?"

Thinking of finding Falada, Ani answered, hopefully, "I work with horses."

The king gestured to a counselor who stood to his right.

"No need at present for a new hand in the stables, sire." The counselor was a tall, thin-faced man who exuded awareness of his own importance. He looked over a parchment he had affixed to a thin board. "However, the goose boy finds himself alone and at odds with a gaggle of fifty."

"Good," said the king, and motioned for Ani to follow the counselor out of the room.

"Wait, uh, sire, I ask a boon. Could I speak with your prime minister for just a moment?"

The king gestured to the waiting counselor with impatience. "As you shall."

Ani blinked, amazed that he granted her wish so readily, thanked him, and curtsied once again as a new petitioner was already waiting. When she straightened, there was a new expression on the king's face. He seemed to see her for the first time, and the lines around his mouth deepened. She felt commanded to hold still for inspection while he looked at her, and she flushed from her neck to her hair.

“Good,” said the king again, and gave her a smile before the chamber-mistress called for his attention.

After the brightness of the receiving chamber, the dark wood walls and deep-toned rugs and tapestries of the corridor were a relief to her eyes. She was going to see the prime minister, and that, too, was a relief. She waited for the counselor to lead the way, but instead he called a pageboy, instructed him to take Ani to the workers’ west settlement, and then turned back to the king’s chamber.

“Wait, uh, sir? The king said I could speak with the prime minister.”

“I am he.”

“Not you. I mean, I met him once when I was younger.”

The prime minister sighed annoyance. “That was someone else, then. I am Thiaddag, the prime minister of Bayern, and have been for the last four years. So sorry I can’t abandon my important duties to reunite you with your old chum.”

He waved her off with the back of his hand and returned to the king.

“Well, come on, then,” said the boy.

Ani hesitated. Working with a goose boy was not part of her plan. But, then, her plan had been weak enough to crumble at the sight of Selia and a new prime minister. For now, she needed a way to stay in this city until she could rescue Falada.

“Yes, all right,” she said, following after the page.

When they emerged into the brightness of the courtyard, the pageboy stopped to stretch back his arms and puff out his chest, and he smiled at the blazing day. He reminded Ani of a robin in his red tunic, his hair unruly like loose feathers.

“My name’s Tatto. I’m the son of a captain of twenty. That’s why I’m a pageboy already, and me with only twelve years.”

“Oh,” said Ani. “Congratulations.”

He narrowed his eyes at her to see if he was catching her in a mocking tone. She shrugged, meaning she did not know if it was a good thing or not to be a pageboy at twelve. He shook his head and muttered, “Forest-born.”

He was talkative as they walked down the steep city streets, informing her of his many and complicated duties as page and all about the city. At length they reached the high city wall and began to travel beside it.

“On the other side of the wall are the pastures—cows, sheep, geese, and all. That’s where you’ll be working.”

“And where are the horses kept?” asked Ani.

“Oh, they’re behind the palace, on so much land you’d have to run to get past it all before breakfast.”

Behind the palace wall, Ani thought dismally. That would be a problem.

At last Tatto directed her to a long house two stories high and painted a yellow as lively as Ani’s tunic. The woman inside was thin and had dull eyes that did not seem to completely take in what they saw. When she spoke, her voice dragged out of her throat reluctantly, punctuated with pauses and moans. She introduced herself as Ideca, the mistress of workers in the west settlements, and sent Tatto off with a warning not to dawdle back as he had no doubt done on the way or his captain would return him to the grease pits of the kitchen. Tatto scowled at the hall-mistress for spoiling his image and rushed out the door.

Ideca looked Ani over. “You’re not to, mmm, get homesick for your Forest folks and run off at first frost.”

“No, I won’t,” said Ani.

“Don’t know why you went to the king instead of coming here direct. Suppose you think it’s a grand entrance, but don’t think it means you’ll be treated different. We all work. That’s what we do here, work.”

Ani nodded and hoped that was sufficient response.

Ideca pursed her lips. “Here’s where you’ll take your meals, morning and night, so you may as well start off with one now, mmm.” She plunked down a bowl of bean soup and a tall glass of water. Ani guzzled the glass of water immediately and then wished she had saved a few swallows to help ease down the cold soup.

Ideca took Ani upstairs to a haphazard wardrobe and gave her a spare skirt and tunic for washday, both pale orange like the rose on a peach, a long cut of birch with a bent end for herding her geese, and a hat with a low straw rim and a ribbon that tied under the chin, effectively hiding, Ani imagined, every strand of one’s hair.

“You’ll be living in the third house from the south, wall-side. The rest of the day’s free. Be back here for breakfast tomorrow early.” She sent Ani out and closed the door.

Opposite the mistress’s hall squatted a row of dwellings, each with one window and a separate door. Ani found the third house and entered. The house was no more than a room—a very small room. With her arms outstretched, she could nearly touch two walls at once. It shared its wooden

sidewalls with neighbors and borrowed the west wall of the city for its back wall. It smelled of the city—refuse, smoke, food, and people and animals living too close together. The house was built right on the square cobblestone of the street, and she felt as though she still stood on the street, and any moment hawkers might come through her door or children playing at catch-the-fly might crawl through her window and jump over her bed to climb the rough stones of the back wall.

A small bed, a side table, and three iron hooks on one wall were the room's only furnishings. Ani thought of her apartments in the White Stone Palace, just the first room that could hold fifteen of these, and she imagined the walls before her pushing back and brightening, white paint pouring over the bare walls like water thickened with light, tapestries of children and birds and hills of autumn unrolling themselves, carpets growing under her feet the way a stream floods its banks, the bed expanding into a mountain of pillows and blankets the way dough explodes into bread, books on the walls, cats at her feet, food on her table, a serving girl at the door saying, "May I help you dress, Crown Princess?" Not crown princess. Not a princess anymore. The serving girl's face was just a round stone in the wall. The mean dullness came crashing back into itself, hard and bleak and small. Ani sat on the bed and stared at her soft, uncallused hands.



After wandering down, around, to dead ends and back, past the acrid smell of cows' kidneys on the street of meat shops and the dizzying emanations of the flowers in hundreds of baskets on the florists' street, Ani finally found the market-square by following the noise. The quiet wagon people from last night had transformed into brazen city peddlers, waving goods at passersby, shouting from the seats of their wagons, standing and calling, "Apples! Herbs! Jars of preserves and nuts and cones! Blankets for the cold, the cold, buy blankets against the coming cold!"

Ani found her traveling companions just as animated, with half their bags empty and a crowd of purchasers fingering Gilsa's intensely dyed yarns and tight knits. Even Finn spoke a word or two and waved a pullover in the air. She realized he was waving it at her, and she jogged to him, still feeling dazed by the noise and agitation of the square.

“Hello, Isi,” he greeted her, and she reminded herself that Isi was her name, for now. The group had sold a good lot of wares, though nearly half still remained and they would have to stay on for the rest of marketweek.

“It’ll be better next month,” said the girl with the red scarf, “when the weather’s cooling and all the world’s afraid of winter.”

“Finn, I’ve been given work here.” She tried to whisper but nearly yelled to be heard above the din. “I’m to tend the king’s geese.” She smiled, for though it was simple labor, it sounded noble in her ears just then, as though she heard Tatto’s satisfied voice swaggering the phrase.

“Good work,” said Finn.

“I just wanted to tell you that, so you wouldn’t wonder where I’d gone.”

He patted her shoulder, then looked at her quizzically. He touched his eyebrow and smiled at her with the energy of a good, secret joke. She wondered what state they were in, hoping that the charcoal had not smeared.

“Well, I should go. Thanks for your kindness.” She turned to leave, then quickly returned and spoke near his ear.

“Finn, should anyone discover you know me, and come to you or your mother, pretending to be my friend, asking where I am, don’t tell them. Please.” She smiled painfully. “You two are the only friends I have in this kingdom.”

He nodded. “I saved you a bit of lunch.” He pulled an apple from the wagon, fat and green, smelling like the sharp, wet grasses of the forest streams. “Luck,” he said, gave her the apple, and returned to his selling.

Ani threaded her way through the stands, carts and wagons, merchants, sellers from outside the city, and city dwellers come out to make a coin. There was a small crowd gathered around a man who juggled red balls. One of the balls turned into a dove, and it flew through the circle. Ani watched, openmouthed.

“Tricks.”

A woman in a green headscarf waved a finger at Ani. She was seated on a blanket so covered by roots, clusters of berries, and dried bunches of leaves that she could not have moved.

“It’s all tricks.” The woman gestured to the juggler. “Not magic.”

“Oh, of course,” said Ani. The woman squinted at her and coughed or, perhaps, laughed.

“You’ve got something in you, don’t you, now?”

Ani creased her brow.

“Words, young thing. In you. More than you think, I think.”

“Is it magic, what I have?”

“Do you know what you have?”

Ani shrugged.

“I also think you want something here.” She swept a dirty hand over her gathered wares.

“Yes, actually, thornroot,” said Ani, asking for a plant she had learned about in her root-gathering days at Gilsa’s. “But I don’t have a coin.”

The woman sniffed. “For the apple.” She produced from a slightly moldy mound a pinkie finger-size root. “All I’ve got. Not in demand.”

They exchanged goods, and before Ani could question her again, the woman shooed her away.

Ani fought her way through the mayhem to the city wall and then followed the wall west, her left hand running along the stones. She had not left the market noise far behind when she caught a glimpse of long objects hanging from the wall up ahead. She blinked and tried to make them out. Before she could see them clearly, she smelled them.

The corpses emanated death under the fierce gaze of the sun. It was the biting odor of sour meat and fresh blood, and it touched the back of her throat like a finger. Her body trembled, wishing to turn inside out, and she quickly stumbled past. She stopped a few paces later. A man leaned against the wall, chewing on a sausage biscuit and staring at what hanged on the wall.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said.

The man spat out a tough bit of meat and looked down at her. “I’m not a sir, Forest girl, I’m Arnout.”

“Arnout, can you tell me why those, those bodies are up there?”

He shrugged. “Criminals. Probably killed somebody or stole animals or took a girl. The bad things. Not cowardice, though. Commit cowardice in the king’s army and you get buried in mud, you get hidden. That’s tradition.” He smiled through a mouthful of chewed biscuit and patted her head. “City’s not much like your little Forest, eh? You’ll get used to it.”

Ani walked away and did not look back. She realized that she did not know if criminals were killed in Kildenree. Perhaps they were. Perhaps they were hidden from her, as much of the world had been. Perhaps her mother had thought she was too weak to know the world.

A long walk later, Ani reached the workers' settlements. She cracked open Ideca's door to ask for a little vinegar, which she received in a loaned cup after a moaned complaint and a mild scolding.

Ani entered the third house in the row, and to avoid the gloom of gray wood and cramped space, she started right to work. The brown thornroot had been a find in that marketplace, dim and forgettable among the berries, roots, and organs used for the bright colors the Bayern sought.

With a loose rock, she cut dark, juicy strips into a hollow in a floor stone, then bruised them in drops of vinegar. Using a little bundle of grass as a brush, she carefully covered the fair hairs of her eyebrows in the dye. Coloring her locks would take more thornroot than she imagined could be found in the entire marketplace, besides the consequence of coloring her hands to her wrists in the process. This would have to do.

She wiped off the dried dye with the underside of her skirt and curled up in bed. Even in her sleep she was aware of the wood slats pressing through the thin mattress like bruises on her back.

Chapter 8

When dawn creaked open its bright eye, Ani could hear both her neighbors stirring, wooden bed frames whining the truth of their age, and boots scraping across stone. She took her yellow tunic and blue skirt from the hook instead of the new rose orange, preferring familiarity to novelty on that morning. She wrapped her hair above her head in a braid and held it in place with her hat. She hoped no one would question why she wore a shade hat even though dawn was a new idea and the sun barely slipped through cracks between buildings to touch cobblestones. She tied the ribbon in a knot beneath her chin and stuffed loose hairs back into its tightness. Armed with her crook, Ani left her little room and braved Mistress Ideca's breakfast tables.

Ani opened the door to the smell of warm food mixed with the odor of cowsheds, breakfast bread, and bodies that spent too much time with animals and too little time in a bath. Ani wondered if she could eat through that smell, though the nearly three dozen workers at the table benches were eating as though half starving.

They were young, some boys nearly as young as Tatto, some girls older than Ani, all with hair shades maple-bark brown to mud black. The hall trembled with the sounds of chatter, metal spoons on ceramic dishes, the slamming of the kitchen door as Ideca's girls entered with full platters and left with dirty plates, and friends called to friends at other tables. Ani noticed that none of the other girls had their hats on. She fingered her brim nervously and looked for a place to sit and keep to herself.

It was not long before she was noticed.

"Conrad, there's your girl," someone yelled.

"There's the new one."

"Go on, Conrad, give her a kiss," said a boy. He pushed a boy in an orange cap off the end of the bench and onto the floor, and that boy promptly pulled himself to his feet and grabbed a handful of cooked eggs. Before his gooey hand reached the offending boy's face, Ideca had leaped forward, seizing his wrist with one hand and his hat and a handful of hair with the other.

“Conrad, I’ll keep you cleaning eggs off the floor at bed-hour, believe I will, so meet Isi and sit down.”

Conrad sniffed. He put the fistful of eggs casually on his plate, rubbed the sticky pieces onto his pant leg, and held out his hand to Ani. He had dull gray eyes, and the freckles on his face lay together as tightly as scales.

“Name’s Conrad,” he said. “I keep the geese.”

“Kiss her,” someone shouted over the din of breakfast.

Conrad jerked his head toward the yeller and yelled back, “Shut it or I’ll stuff your nose holes full of breakfast, and I’ll clean it and you off the floor until next morning if I have to.”

He renewed his gesture of welcome, and Ani took his hand and then surreptitiously wiped off the egg goo behind her back.

“Good to meet you,” she said.

“Where you from?” said a girl in the back.

“The Forest,” she said.

“Of course you are, you sparrow chick,” said the girl, “but which part?”

Ani realized that most of this group must have come from the Forest to work in the city and send money home to families.

“Near Darkpond,” she said, repeating the place she had heard Finn’s neighbors speak of.

“She talks like someone I know from Darkpond,” Ani heard a girl say.

Some nodded, and she was dropped out of the general attention in favor of breakfast. Ani ate slowly, focusing on swallowing the heavy, hot food that it seemed too early to eat. She watched Conrad and his friends, amazed at the heaping plates of eggs and lumps of beans with mutton chunks and hot, greasy oat muffins they consumed with careless speed. When the dishes were empty, they wiped their mouths on the backs of their hands, their hands on their trousers, or on each other in brief, concentrated wrestling matches, and the benches emptied with rousing scrapes of wood against the stone floor.

“Get your stick,” said Conrad, grabbing his own from where it stood with the others near the door. As they left, a chorus of “Conrad’s got a girl, Conrad’s girl,” moved from mouth to mouth.

“Come on, goose girl,” Conrad said testily, and they walked up a narrow street.

Ani used the base of her stick between stones to help her climb. Conrad did not wait, and she caught up to him when the steepness had ebbed out.

Soon Ani could hear the mutterings of animals—sheep, pig, chicken, goat—they lost their particularity in their numbers. Conrad unlocked the door of a low structure. The jabber of housed geese greeted their entrance, and immediately Ani realized that their language was far different from swan. She found herself unable to pick out a single word.

"You kept geese before?" said Conrad. Ani shook her head, and he rolled his eyes. "Take it easy at first, all right? Just let me do it and you stand back and make sure they don't wander away. Geese don't like new people, but better a new girl than a new boy. The ganders nearly bit the knees off the last boy that came crawling from the Forest looking for a city job. He didn't last long with me. With the pigs, now."

"Thanks for the warning," she said.

"I don't care if they bite off your kneecaps, goose girl, I'm just telling you." He shrugged and opened the pen.

Geese were smaller and much less grand than the swans she knew. Though like her swans in form, the geese seemed simplified by larger heads, shorter necks, and feet and bills orange like exotic fruit.

The palace grounds in Kildenree did not have a goose pen, and Ani had seen the birds only from a distance. Sometimes from the library window she had watched a short-haired country girl with bare feet, a stick, and a hat made of thick paper rolled in on itself like a whittled bit of wood. She used to walk a dozen geese down a river-sided lane toward the free pastures on the edges of the city. It had seemed carefree enough to Ani then, and the girl had given the impression of happy complacency, the geese at her feet just pale flutterings of her thoughts.

Ani's thoughts were pulled back to the moment by a loud, unlovely honk. A broad-headed gander stepped out of the pen and knocked Ani's leg with his beak. She tumbled backward in surprise and landed on her backside. When she looked up again, his neck and head were stooped down to the ground and forward, as though his body held a ready sword. He was rushing forward, his open, hissing beak aimed at her face. She flung her arms over her head and tensed for pain, and when nothing happened, she peeked out to see Conrad's crook around the gander's neck.

"Stand up," he said. "That's a stupid thing to do."

Ani scrambled to her feet, leaning over to her dropped stick with an eye on the geese.

"I'm sorry," she said.

“Huh. Let’s go.”

It was several long, bruising streets to the pasture gate. Fifty geese were too many for one boy and worse for a boy and a goose-ignorant girl who more often than not found herself in the middle of the gaggle, her calves nipped emphatically. Conrad maintained his position in the rear, driving the horde with whistles and nudges from his staff. Occasionally he shouted, “Goose girl, they’re drifting,” and sent her scampering after a loose bunch.

Ani listened in vain to their mutterings to pick out familiar sounds. She tried some swan, and they seemed to laugh at her and nip at her legs a little harder.

At last they reached a narrow, arched gateway cut in the city wall. Beyond it lay green pastures, bordered on the near side by the outside of the city wall and on the far by tall water trees and a narrow stream. The sight of the pasture caught the geese’s attention like the smell of food after a fast. Their necks straightened, and their small eyes focused on the grass and the shimmering stream beyond.

Ani slipped through the arch before them to count the bright beaks as they passed by. It was a bulky wave of white, defined by orange bills and blue eyes.

“Forty-seven,” said Ani. “There should be fifty, but I’d pledge blood we didn’t let a one get away.”

Conrad shrugged.

“Aren’t you concerned?” she said. “Shouldn’t we go back and look?”

He met her look with defiance. “They were missing before. I’ve been alone with this rabble for more than a week, and what can I do if three disappear when there’re forty-seven off in every direction? I’d like to see you do better.”

The day moved slowly with the sun, and Ani stayed in the shade of a lone beech tree in the middle of their pasture. Not distant from her feet lay the near lip of a small pond that filled with the edges of the stream. The geese wandered near the pond, moving in groups of five or so to graze where the grass was longer or digging for grubs on the muddy banks. It was not a broad pasture, but long, bordered on both ends with hedges that served as fences, beyond which Ani caught glimpses of sheep on one side and something else, maybe cows, on the other.

Ani gazed into the distance, hoping to see horses out to graze, and among them, Falada. But Tatto had told her the horses were kept in the city

pastures behind the palace. To assuage her guilt, Ani reasoned that Falada was probably much better off than she, eating mountains of oats and sleeping contentedly in the royal stables. If he was not dead. That thought stung. And if he was, how could she find out without being killed herself?

Speculation was useless. There was no occasion to leave the fields all that day. *What was I expecting*, thought Ani, *an hour off for tea?* Hours past noon, a street hawker leaned out of the pasture arch announcing hot meat-breads in a clear, practiced call. Conrad waved him away with a disappointed gesture. Neither goose girl nor goose boy had any money.

When the sharp orange of evening sun burned on the horizon, Conrad called to her that it was time to go. He had remained separate from Ani all the day, seeking his shade under the birches that grew along the stream, tossing stones upstream and lazily chasing geese to hear them honk.

The herding home was easier. The geese were worn from the day and ready to rest. Only once were the crooks employed, when a couple of ganders left the group to make sport of a broken-toothed street cat that had come too close to one of the females.

When they had locked the geese into their pen and stumbled into the dining house, Ani at last understood the concentrated devouring of breakfast. Her stomach perked up at the smell of food, muttering and tightening itself in anticipation.

Dinner with the workers was as lively as the breakfast had been, despite the fact, Ani noted, that they were fed bean and lard pies, potatoes without butter, and green beans that were cooked to mush. The group ate vigorously, and Ani felt inclined to do the same. The smell of animals on people was even more pungent, but Ani ate through it.

A noise drew her attention to the door. It slammed behind a girl near Ani's age, red faced and huffing for breath. Her black hair was loose at her shoulders, and she had wide eyes that put Ani in mind of an owl. She leaned against the doorpost, waved her hand at a group of boys who stood nearby, and, swallowing air, pushed her voice through her throat.

"Quick. Razo, Beier. That sulky old ram . . . he beat down a hole in his pen . . . got into my chick coop . . . I tried to stop him, but I—"

Without a word, two of the boys grabbed the nearest crooks and fled the hall. The door shut, and the girl faced the hall. Immediately Ani noticed that the girl's expression changed. She no longer fought for breath, and a

creeping smile pressed dimples into her cheeks. “But I couldn’t stop him because I was so busy rigging a bucket of oat mush above the door.”

Laughter bubbled out of the corners of the hall, building as the other workers caught on. Ani smiled, too, and shook her head as her imagination raced to the coop, where those poor boys were opening the door. The girl bobbed a curtsy and sat on Ani’s bench.

“It’s a payback,” she said, grabbing a cold bean pie. “They put colored eggs in one of my chickens’ nests for a week. I poured every medicine I knew down that poor hen’s throat and laid witch-bought charms around her nest until I finally spotted a bit of paint on some hay. Devilish, they are.”

The girl smiled with good humor, and Ani smiled back until she felt shamed by the girl’s prettiness and confidence and looked down.

“You’re from Darkpond?” said the girl. “I’m Enna, from Sprucegrove area, you know, just down past the stream.”

Ani nodded.

“Not to worry. Conrad’s no festival, but he’s all right enough. He takes time to warm up to new people, just like any animal.”

“I’ve only just arrived in the city,” said Ani. “My first time here, really.” Enna raised her brows, and Ani nodded, grateful to have some truth to tell. “Can you tell me news? What happens here?”

A boy across the table heard her question and snorted. “Not much, not for us, you see that. Not a day off—”

“But marketday,” said another.

“—but marketday, and maybe a festival or two, but won’t be another festival until wintermoon, and then who knows.”

No break until next marketday. Ani realized she would have to wait a month for an opportunity to find Falada. But surely he was well off, she convinced herself. *If he is alive, he must be well.*

“When’s the prince married?” asked a girl one bench over.

Ani casually put her hand on her neck to hide the goose bumps pricking her skin.

“Oh, don’t recall,” said the boy. “Not now, anyway.”

“There’ll be festival then, you’ll see, like the royals like to have to toot their royalness. It’ll be a week long with little work and apple cakes for free.”

Ani tilted her head and tried to speak as though the answer did not matter the least in the world. “Getting married, is the prince?” she said. “To

whom?”

“Some yellow girl from Kildenree. A princess, I guess. Can’t imagine His Royal would marry anything less.”

“She’s a princess,” said Enna. “I laid my very own eyes on her expensive skin.”

The eaters around lifted heads and quieted down.

“Why didn’t you tell about it before, Enna-girl?”

“Yeah, you got secrets as dark as your mop?”

“I did tell about it to those who shut up and listened, so shut it now and I’ll tell. It was two weeks or so ago, and I was heading to the apothecary near the city gate for what I *thought* was a sick chicken, and the streets were all lined with people. Everybody was talking about her. No one had known when they would come, you know, with them traveling so far, and never did send a messenger forward, I heard someone say.”

“And those Kildenrees, or Kildenreans, or whatever, came marching in with their own little army, I’m guessing.”

“Not really. Just twenty men or so, and more horses. The princess rode a big white horse with all the trappings.”

Ani felt her heart beating in her stomach. Falada. He was alive, then. She wanted to grab Enna’s arms and beg her for every detail. She sat on her hands.

“And I don’t know much about horses, but I heard some men talking by me, and they said it was a cursed good horse, and that she didn’t know how to ride him right, and that she probably rode some docile puppy horse through the Forest and mounted the fine steed last minute just for show and all.”

Ani smiled.

“Just like a princess,” said Conrad. “But enough of horses, what’d the girl look like?”

“She’s not for you, Conrad,” said his neighbor, who promptly got an elbow in the ribs.

“Pretty, I guess,” said Enna. “Light hair, not so much a real yellow as washed-out brown, like Conrad’s bathwater. She was wearing a dress showy enough for a princess, silvery and sparkling with a neck almost this low.” Enna pointed to a spot four finger widths from the hollow of her throat. One girl laughed and another sighed. Ani placed a hand on her chest and felt her cheeks warm. On her, the dress had fallen slightly lower.

A girl laughed and pointed at Ani. “I think the goose girl’s dreaming she’s the princess.”

Enna put an arm around her shoulder and shook her amiably. “Who wants to be a snooty, lace-necked royal and miss tending the geese? Right, little sister?”

“No, that’s right, I wasn’t thinking that,” said Ani. “Um, did you hear anything they said? The princess or her guards?”

“Mmm, no, I don’t think so. There was one guard, a big man with two braids the color of bad milk hanging down each shoulder, that rode up with her, and they leaned in close and talked, looking down at us, around at the city, passing judgment on everybody and everything they saw, I guessed. A bit boorish. I’d imagined princesses were supposed to sit up straight and look stoic, if you know what I mean.”

Ani nodded.

“That’s it, really. A lot of horses, a few wagons, twenty scruffy guards, and a princess in a gaudy dress showing enough bosom for a tavern girl.”

A tall girl grumbled. “Tatto said that she takes one of her own guards wherever she goes, to go eat, to the gardens, like she doesn’t trust the palace guards. And she’s never left the palace grounds, afraid to dirty her tiny foot on our Bayern stones.”

“I heard she’s had ten new dresses made since she arrived,” said another girl, “and that’s a fact, because my aunt’s friend’s a seamstress in the city and she knows the palace dress-mistress.”

“They say she never goes riding or into the city, but stays holed up with her Kildenrean friends and they whisper to each other in that whiny accent.”

Several nodded. “That’s how Kildenreans are,” said one.

Ani began to nod, then stopped. *If I were where I was supposed to be, I never would have met the workers of the west settlement. I’d be the yellow girl from Kildenree, with the whiny accent and pompous manner.* Just then, that seemed a pitiable fate.

The door swung open with force, its knob thumping against the wall. Razo, a short boy with a dark, defiant head of hair and an expressive face that was grim and severe then, stood with hands in fists. Beier stood behind him, holding their unused staffs. Their hair and shoulders were dripping with a gray slop.

“Enna,” said Razo, his voice trembling with warning.

Enna just laughed. “You’re welcome, boys.” She raised her water mug in salute. Others raised theirs, too, in a cheer heavy with laughter that did not completely break until the hour for bed.

Chapter 9

The days dawned with a frail morning chill and filled out with mild breezes. Autumn's newness hummed in the air. The geese sensed the coming change, and pairs strolled together, leaving their grown goslings solitary. Occasionally one bird interrupted its browsing to stare up at a breeze, smelling what news it brought, calling out to its brothers and sisters, *The first gust of autumn is here.*

Or so Ani imagined. She passed most of the day under her beech tree, her gaggle at a safe distance. She watched and she listened. Geese made so much more noise than swans, she wondered how she would ever be able to single out the sounds, let alone assign their meanings. This time she had no aunt to guide her. Some bird tongues were so similar that going from one to the other was like switching between her Bayern and Kildenrean accents. But goose was unlike any bird tongue she had learned. She leaned forward, cocking her head like a robin to a worm in the ground. *Prattle, prattle, honk, honk, hiss*—the sounds were as meaningless as the rustling of dry leaves.

At night Ani felt exhausted, but often she could not sleep, not for hours, the darkness behind her eyelids promising dreams. *Adon's middle split by a sword tip. Talone yelling, yelling. Ungolad's hand on her boot.*

Lying on her bed, she could see the dark intimation of the southernmost palace spire and on certain nights a dim star of a candle flame that winked in one window. She watched it until she slept. That point of light spoke of someone else awake, someone thoughtful, someone alone. Sometimes in her dreams, her mind wandered those foreign palace halls, tripping over carpets too fine to be pressed by her dirty boot, losing herself in passages too elaborate for her goose girl brain. She was often searching for something, Falada or Selia, and when she found them, she stood there stupidly, not knowing what to do. Sometimes instead of searching, she was running. A hand seized her ankle.

In the mornings, Ani dressed her bruised, goose-bitten body and breakfasted in silence. The girl Enna sought her out from time to time, and Ani tried to respond with friendly attentiveness. Ani felt as dumb at conversation as she had over Gilsa's cooking pot that day she prepared the

lunch, the contents turning blacker and smelling fouler despite her anxious attempts. She had no practice at making friends. And, she discovered, her own trust had been drained dry.

One new autumn morning, over a week after Ani had arrived in the city, they found one of Conrad's strays. Ani saw him first, just a white mark beside the pond. She thought it might be a washed-out bit of wood pushed ashore by the night water, or a forgotten shirt, though she had yet to see a Bayern wear plain white. Ani was so absorbed with the distant figure that she was not prepared to defend herself against a particularly aggressive gander that, after passing through the pasture gate, took a moment to extend his thin neck and nip her on the rear.

"Stop it. Oh, just stop it, all of you." Ani rubbed the spot with the heel of her hand, and Conrad laughed.

"You've got a few friendly goose pals, I guess," he said.

Ani glowered. "Yes, I guess."

The lone gander did not move when the gaggle arrived at the water's edge. He squeaked a greeting, and some geese gathered around him, chattering over one another and prodding his side with their beaks.

"One of the three," said Conrad. "He's been gone two weeks."

The gander raised his head at Conrad but seemed too tired to stand. Several feathers hung loose, giving the appearance of a poorly stuffed pillow. Ani stepped forward, intending to check him for bites or scratches. A large goose turned her back on the gander and hissed at Ani, the top of her beak raised threateningly, her pink tongue trembling. Ani's bruises throbbed at the sound.

"All right," she said, "I'll stay away. Take care of your own, because I've no more good skin to give over to another bruise."

Ani sat under her tree and gazed up at the palace. The warm morning lulled her, and she rested her head against the tree and tried to imagine how to free Falada from the palace stables and, after that, how to get home again.

A rumble of hoofbeats broke her daydream apart. A group of horsemen outfitted for hunting cantered down the goose pasture. Several veered their horses to pass right through the middle of the flock and sent the geese flurrying with a cacophonous chorus of honks and a beating of wings to strike speed into their flat feet. Ani lowered her head and peered at the horsemen from under her hat brim, wary of any familiar faces or light-

colored hair. There was no need. The nobles on their grand horses never turned an idle eye on the goose girl. They leaped their mounts across the goose pasture stream and entered the woods on the other side. None of their horses was white.

The beech shadow had moved, and the sun was heating Ani's cheeks. She stepped into its northern shadow. There was the gander, still in his same spot, though alone now, the others having left him when fleeing the hooves. He raised his head at her with a little more energy and opened his beak slightly. Ani was not sure if it was meant to be a hiss.

The gander slowly stood and took an awkward step. He stopped. He leaned his body forward and let the momentum pull him into a few sloppy strides.

"Are you using your last, dying strength to attack me?" she said. "Now, that would be silly."

The gander still stumbled forward and, gaining her folded leg, sat down hard by it, his body close up against her ankle. Ani held very still.

"Did you have a long journey?" She pulled up a handful of grass that was turning to seed and held it near his head. He looked at it for a moment, then lowered his beak and nibbled it out of her palm. It tickled, and Ani concentrated on not twitching her hand.

"Oh, I see, you want to be babied. Mmm. Seeing as how I'm not doing anything else, I'll oblige. But this means I've the right to name you, and your name'll be Jok, after that old tale of the wanderer that always returns."

He nibbled again but made no noises. She thought she could hear his labored breathing.

"Poor gosling. It hurts to be lost. And worse to be home with no kind of homecoming. You're my good-luck bird, Jok. I'll be lucky if I can do as well as you when all this's done, just a bit out of breath, a bit bruised and scratched, a bit wiser and sadder for it all."

He finished the last blade of grass from her palm, and when she did not immediately pull up another handful, Jok looked at her and gave a gentle honk. She had torn another fistful of grass and let him pick each blade from her palm before she realized that she had understood. He had asked for more.

That evening, Ani carried Jok home under her arm. After they locked the rest of the geese in their pen, Ani examined the animal and found three claw

marks across his thigh, one of them deep, the pink flesh swollen around the wound.

"I'm taking him to Ideca to see about a salve."

"However you want," said Conrad.

Ideca had a dark and pungent balm, "good enough for anybody's scratch, goose, cow, or girl," and Ani held Jok steady while Ideca worked it under the feathers into the deepest cut. Her languid eyes brightened a little while she handled the animal.

"This should be Conrad helping you. The boy can't be coerced into lifting a finger after his geese are penned. I shouldn't say what I think around you, mmm, since you goose-keepers are no doubt tighter than knots already."

"He doesn't talk much," said Ani.

"He's probably shy of you." Ideca looked her over with similar attention that she gave the goose. "You're a pretty one. I guess you know that, since you wear that hat dawn to dusk, protecting your skin even from the weak light of the moon. Some of this Forest lot got plans to keep them in the city. Guess yours is the hope you'll marry a nobleman, mmm?"

Ani took Jok to her room, her face still burning from Ideca's comments.

Jok slept that night on Ani's bed between her feet. In the morning she jabbered at him and he jabbered back, and some of it made sense. She fed him brown bread from the breakfast table. Razo joshed that the goose girl had found her mate and asked Conrad if he had his eye on a particular goose, for which Razo got a slap upside the head. The familiarity of the exchange gave Ani a smile. She brought Jok to Ideca for more salve that night, and the next, and his cut healed. Soon, Ani admitted to herself that she let the goose sleep on her bed not for his own sake, but for the comfort the creature gave her against the dark dream of running.



Ani woke to Jok squawking in her ear that the sun had risen and it was time to eat. She imitated the sound to him, and he repeated it again in their practiced back-and-forth game of noises. Finally she answered him, tentatively, with what she thought was an affirmation, that yes, it was time for eating. Ani guessed she understood more than what she could even try to say, and when Jok gave no response, she groaned to herself. The goose

made a deep noise, which Ani thought might be a mock of her own, and they groaned nonsensically to each other on the way to breakfast.

Herding the geese down the avenue that morning proved to be a task fit for a battalion of goose girls. There was more traffic than usual. A gaggle of children playing chase mixed themselves into the gaggle of geese, and Ani left her post at the head to round up strays. She had been trying words on the geese and had begun to see them respond. At least, they were less inclined to bite her legs when she tried to speak their tongue.

Ani clucked and honked at the scattered geese, and Conrad rolled his eyes.

"Thinks she's a goose," he said.

"At least it works," she said.

Conrad made mock goose noises back at her until he saw something up ahead that quieted him. His expression changed, suggesting eagerness, and Ani peered ahead to see what he saw.

Two street cats, crouching, tails twitching, one perched on the rim of a wagon, the other underneath, muscles poised and eyes fixed on the nearest goose. And Ani was too far away to draw back the lead geese with her crook.

She made a noise she had heard them use before, a warning word she thought meant "dog." The geese, quick as instinct, turned their backs and huddled together, and the ganders, with strong wings raised, heads low to the ground, twenty throats hissing as one, rushed the beasts. The cats drew in their claws, hissed once in return, and loped away into the dirty streets.

Ani and Conrad flocked the geese safely through the arch and down the slope. Once the lead goose passed through the archway, Ani turned to Conrad with anger that she still felt.

"You could've warned," said Ani. "You wanted to see me fail, sacrifice a goose to see me be an imbecile."

"If you're so much better at goose-keeping, then go to." Conrad marched away, crossed the stream, and spent the day on the far side, out of sight.

Later that same day, Ani saw a single horseman. When he rode through the arch, Ani glanced up, and then, seeing that his horse was a bay, she returned her attention to the pair of geese that had approached Jok. She had to concentrate, for geese talked over one another like old men who had lost their hearing, and while they did not employ as much movement as swans did in their language, there were still neck bobbings and beak liftings and

tail waggings to add to the meanings. Ani guessed they were asking Jok about his journey and he was informing them of the many adventures of a rogue goose.

After a few moments, she remembered the horseman and glanced up to the gate, but she was startled to see that he had disappeared. He was not on the far ends of the goose pasture by either of the lines of hedges, and she would have noticed had he ridden past her and crossed the stream.

The inarticulate thumping of hooves roused her to her feet, and Jok from her lap, honking resentfully. The man had jumped his horse over the hedges to the north and was racing across her field. He wrenched the reins, but the horse continued to run. The man pulled harder, and the horse bucked at the tension, his back arched, his neck bent low. The horse heaved and twisted and dumped the rider from the saddle. The horse bucked again for good measure, then trotted to a halt.

The man leaped up, grabbed the reins, and swung himself into the saddle. The bay seemed to consider bucking again but instead stood still, his body heavy, unmovable, his legs stiff. Ani recognized the stance. She had seen Falada act in like manner when a stable-hand had tried to ride him. Her breath escaped quickly through her lips in a quiet laugh.

“Mule,” said the man. He swung himself off the unyielding horse. The moment his boot touched soil, the animal was wild again, rearing up on his mighty back legs, swinging his head like a banner in strong wind, ripping the reins from the man’s hands. The horse knocked him aside with a sudden lurch and raced across the pasture, stopping before the line of hedges on the south side. The man tore a clump of grass and threw it back at the ground.

Ani jogged up the slope toward the bay. “Stay,” she said to the man as she passed, her hand out, like an order given to a dog. He noticed her for the first time, and his face flushed.

“Oh, um, lady, I don’t recommend whatever it is you have in mind.”

She ignored him. The bay paced near the hedges, his ears pinned back to his neck, his steps stiff and long. When she neared, his outer ear opened to her and the muscles of his neck flinched at the new annoyance.

Ani advanced, her shoulders straight, her head high, her eyes locked on to his.

“Look at me,” she said quietly. “Some riders are beneath you, aren’t they? I want to be your equal. I want to meet you.”

The horse pranced. He held his tail high and pounded a half circle around her, but to the side was the wall, to the back was the hedge, and on the far side sat the irritating rider. The bay seemed to find Ani more interesting and stopped near her. She smiled. He had that look Falada sometimes wore, one ear stiff and one relaxed, his back leg crooked as though he wanted her to think he did not care a thimbleful of oats about her. Ani turned her back and looked down, playing at the same game.

It was not long before she heard slow thuds behind her and felt a warm, clover-sticky huff of breath on her neck.

She turned slowly and into a rather heavy exhale that made her blink, first from the powerful smell and then again for the reminder of Falada, and she found her eyes were too wet to see straight until she could blink them dry. She put the flat of her hand on the bay's forehead and rubbed it. He rested his nose in her other hand and sniffed ponderously.

"Hello there, horse friend," she said. "Can you smell your speech on me? I knew the speech of one horse. Though I can't hear your thoughts, your touch is nearly as comforting. It's kind of you to let me touch you. It's good to be reminded how much I miss him." She spoke to him soothingly as she rubbed his neck and sides and legs, all down his right side, and then passed under his neck and rubbed his left side.

He stiffened as she approached his mounting side, so she made nickering noises, soothing things mares murmured to their foals. The bay responded with deep sounds from his throat that were not words, akin to hums and laughter, noises that carried emotion or the basis of connection.

She continued to stroke him until her hands reached his shoulder where the knotted reins hung over one side. Holding the ends of the reins, Ani placed a boot in a stirrup and hopped onto his back. The horse rearranged his stance, but his muscles did not freeze up. Ani's skirt slid up as she mounted, but it was wide and dropped over her boot tops once arranged. She felt comfortable on a horse again, like finding a favorite childhood spot in the garden. She looked at her flock, busy and peaceful around the pond a ways down the slope, and across the stream where the trees were thicker she thought she could make out Conrad's orange cap.

"Very nice," said the rider. He had approached and was watching with an unclear expression.

She turned away and let her heels dig in. The bay sprang into a canter.

The pasture was a violent green, smoothed of shadows and imperfections by sheer speed, just one color united. The gray of the wall was constant to her right, the shimmer of the stream to her left, and she let her heart be lifted by the wind that seemed so thick as to blow through her body and make her light as itself. The horse felt glad to run, and the pressure from her legs bade him go faster, and faster. The wind fought her hat brim and filled up her ears, speaking words that she thought she could almost hear, and she rode faster, wanting to get closer to the source, to get inside the wind and see what it saw. They neared the northern hedge, and Ani crouched low to the horse's neck and gripped his sides with her knees, feeling herself become part of the thundering of hoofbeats, and then the tremendous escape from earth as he leaped. Her body lifted skyward and free.

Ani rode a short ways before, prodded by guilt, she turned the bay around and jumped the hedge again, to find the man running toward her. The wind died as the horse slowed, and she felt its words leave her skin unspoken. She stopped by the man's side and dismounted.

"What do you mean, riding away on my horse?" His breath came a little quicker from the run. "You can't . . . can't just do that."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have mounted him without your permission. I got carried away." But she did not feel sorry. She felt herself grinning.

The man straightened, trying to be serious in spite of her grin. "Yes, you shouldn't, I mean, he's my horse."

"That aside, I really couldn't have been expected to stand by and watch without lending a hand. It wasn't hard to see the mount didn't trust the rider."

The man opened his mouth and tried to laugh, but he just shook his head. "I could've stayed at the grounds if I'd wanted this kind of pointed abuse. I know I'm not an expert horse breaker, but I'm doing what any stable-master would do."

I should stop harassing him, she thought, but her own boldness was intoxicating, and she continued.

"Oh, come now, surely you can feel how uneasy he is when you mount. You can see him roll back his eyes as though he'd like to be everywhere he can see but here with you. He's an untrained, wild animal, and half-crazy with fright that you're leading him to predators and all kinds of

uncomfortable situations. You've got to get him to commit to you before you can gallop over hedges and up and down strange pastures."

"Look now, you've overstepped yourself here, and I find this a bit of an uncomfortable situation myself and am itching to roll my own eyes, if you'd know."

"I guess I have overstepped myself, and you've every right to be angry at me, if you're angry, of which I'm not entirely certain, since you seem to be laughing at the same time, but you don't need to pretend to be innocent here. I mean, if you're as good a horse breaker as any, why did you seek out the seeming privacy of the goose pasture instead of working him on the palace grounds? You live at the palace, don't you?"

The man lifted his brows at her and nodded. *He's surprised I know that*, thought Ani, *though any fool can see the horse wears the palace insignia on his saddle blanket*. She could see he was not a nobleman's son, lacking the softness and self-assurance she remembered from her boy cousins, so the horse was probably not his. He had work-hardened hands that were broad and strong and shoulders fit for lifting. Ani decided that most likely he was a palace guard or watchman.

The man looked at the dirt on his boot tip. The pasture was suddenly quiet, and she noticed the distance-muted calls of Jok, who said, *Come back, come back.*

She looked closer at the man. He was older than she, though not by many years. He had thick black hair, cut just longer than his shoulders, that he tied back in a low pony's tail, and the kind of prominent jaw and chin that would stay prominent for all his life. His shoulders were broad, and it was not just a trick of a well-cut tunic, as his was a thin cotton, roughly made. She was thinking of how she had ordered him and insulted him and mounted his horse to ride down the pasture like a crazed thief. The anonymity of her goose girl costume and name gave leash to a freedom that she had never dared exhibit when she had been the crown princess shivering in her mother's shadow. Her throat felt dry. She coughed, and realized that she was mortified.

"So, you see, that's what I saw," said Ani. And coughed again.

The man shook his head, and then she saw that he was indeed laughing.

"Here I stand," he said, "glum as a plum because I couldn't do it by myself, and you're right, I'd run away from those blasted, overpopulated training fields to break in this beast away from the stable-master and his

horde who have been laughing at my fatuous attempts all week. And to come here, for privacy, and get schooled in horse mastery by a girl."

Ani gave a vexed laugh.

"Oh, I mean," he said quickly, "not that you can't know more about horses than a man. I'm botching all from my hair to my shoes today. What I want to say is, you're better with this bay than I can ever learn to be, and you seem to enjoy riding him. When you're his mistress, he doesn't look to need any breaking at all. I can't give him to you outright as, actually, he's not mine, but I don't see why you couldn't take him to your home for as long as you like, or until I get the word that he's needed. So, yes, truly, why don't you take him so the poor beast can be ridden properly, all right?"

Ani's face flamed instantly, and she looked down and waited for him to realize his error. She shuffled her feet, wishing for a tree to lean against or behind.

"Don't be shy about it. May I remind you, lady, that you haven't been shy so far? Go on, he's yours."

Ani felt humiliation deep as her bones, and she shook her head.

"Oh, you might think that I'm trying to pawn off my job of breaking him onto you. I can pay you. I think. I'm unfamiliar with this kind of business. How much would be fair?" Ani covered her face with one hand, and the man groaned and muttered angrily at himself. "Blast, I've done something again. You don't offer to pay ladies. You've insulted her again, you daft, clumsy brute."

"No, you're very kind. You don't understand. It's just, I've no place to keep him."

The man seemed to see her dress for the first time, and his gaze fell behind her, where the gaggle waddled about and honked at the sun that was slipping into the west. It was his turn to blush.

"You're not . . . I'm sorry. I'd thought you were, you were just picnicking out here. I was thoughtless. Forgive me."

Ani laughed. "A goose girl should feel honored to be mistaken for a lady with land to put a horse on, sir."

"You didn't say 'sir' when you stole my horse. Geric. My name's Geric."

He stood expectantly after that, perhaps waiting for her name; but, her boldness spent, she just nodded and walked away. Conrad was fording the stream, and it was nearly time to herd the geese home. When she turned back, the man and his horse had gone. Ani felt disappointment slide into her

body where the wind had blown her free. She shook her head at herself and tried to trick it away with forced detachment.

"You're not who you used to be," she said. "You're just a goose girl."

Chapter 10

The next day was stormy rain. Ani lay awake in her bed to the euphony of heavy water on her thin roof. The pane was a stream of moving darkness, and she watched it lighten to silver. It was the first rainfall since she had come to the city. In the dizziness of early morning and little sleep, Ani wondered what she would find outside, if the night and the water had washed it all away, the pasture, the walls, the guards, the palace, and left her with her name again standing in mud and darkness.

Soon Jok was awake, picking at the wrinkles in her wool blanket, mock grazing. Sometimes he would pull a balled bit of lint loose and let it hang from his bill. Ani greeted him, and he said, *It is raining. It is raining*, she repeated. He continued his dry graze. She asked the goose if it was morning, but he did not answer. She tried, *Is there sun in the sky?* But he still did not understand, unresponsive as though no sound had been made. *Are you hungry?* she asked. *Yes*, said the goose.

"That's no help," Ani said. "You're always hungry."

Unsure if it was night, dawn, or day, Ani dressed, steadied the bird on one shoulder, and dashed to the workers' hall.

Several workers were gathered there, and not one seemed sure of the exact time. Ideca's girls had laid out bowls of an informal breakfast, and the workers snacked casually, lounging on the benches and on the floor, talking, as though rain had scrubbed away all the work.

Ani found Conrad in a group playing at pick-up-sticks, and she asked him if they were to go to the fields.

"Maybe," he said.

"Thank you so much, Sir Helpful One," said Enna. "Isi, you'll see how it goes soon enough. The mistress only has a few rain cloaks, so we take turns seeing to our animals. We stay here, mostly, and wait for the storm to clear."

"Raindays're almost as good as marketdays," said Razo.

When two of the pig-keepers returned, Conrad and Ani took their oiled cloaks and went to the pens. Jok followed, splashing through the puddles, squawking about speed and no food, but otherwise undeterred by the rain. They brought wet clover from the animal garden and dry corn from the feed barrels, taking armloads into the clamorous stall and pulling enough water

from the well to last the day. Ani left Jok there, and she and Conrad hurried back to allow others a turn at the cloaks.

The rain did not stop. The day never dawned more than the brightness of lightning shocks or the dim grayness that came from neither east nor west. Ani sat apart, gazing at the night-day, wishing to lie down on the pavement and let the water soak her, then beat down on her, through her, work her away until all that was left was her core. She wondered what that would be.

The next day would be marketday. She marveled that she had been in the city one month and she was still the goose girl. Yesterday she had been as bold as a queen with that rider, that Geric, yet she could not be bold with herself.

At the idea of Geric, her thoughts slipped to an image of his hands as he held the knotted reins, the straps seeming thin in their bigness. And the three lines that marked the corners of his eyes when he smiled. And the moment when she climbed onto his horse, when her skirt slipped up over her knee. Before she pulled it down, he must have seen her shift, or perhaps, perhaps her leg.

Ani stood to shake off the chill of embarrassment. The light of outside was wet and dull, but the hall was aflame with candles. Most of the workers were present, playing games and laughing, their holiday voices shadowed by the tenacious rainfall pounding the roof. The oiled cloaks hung on the wall, out of demand. Ani was tempted to take one and go check the geese, converse with them in their friendly, cryptic language, chattering at spiders and complaining of closeness. Or she could run back to her room, lie on her cot, and watch the rain blur the world of her window.

And hide, she realized. Always she wanted to hide. *No more*. To approach the king again, she would need a horde of people by her side to guarantee she would not be the victim of a quick dagger in a dark corridor before ever telling her story. Where else could she meet people to help her but here? She took a breath and joined the throng.

Enna was sitting near the fire, watching cheese melt on the bread she had placed on a hearthstone. A dollop of orange cheese dripped off the crust, and Enna caught it with her finger, licking it off before she could feel the heat.

“Sit down,” she said when she saw Ani. She handed her a thick slice of bread and a block of cheese with a knife, then turned her eyes to the hearth.

“Why aren’t you playing?” said Ani, gesturing to the many games of cards and sticks around the room.

“Oh, the fire,” said Enna. Its orange fingers waved specters on the blacks of Enna’s eyes. “I get to looking and can’t look away. Don’t you ever feel like fire is a friendly thing? That it’s signaling to you with its flames, offering something?”

Ani watched not the fire but the play of its light on Enna’s face and felt comfort that there were others who listened for language in what was supposed to be mute and who sought out meaning in what was only beautiful.

“Enna, today’s free. Why doesn’t anyone go out into the city? Everyone huddles here as though there’s nowhere else in the world.”

“You know, there’s not for us, all of us Forest folk. And not especially for the boys.”

“Why not?”

Enna looked at Ani quizzically.

“This truly is the first time you’ve been out of the Forest, then? We don’t really belong here, you know, if you ask anyone in the city. We still belong to our families back home and just live here. We watch their animals. We’re almost, almost like animals to them.” Enna looked at Razo, who sat across the room, losing at sticks.

“When these boys reach a man’s age, they don’t receive their rites and the javelin and shield from their chief and become a part of their community, not like the town boys. The fathers of our boys never received a javelin. There are no chiefs in the Forest, and the king doesn’t think twice about his Forest men. It doesn’t really matter, I guess, until poorer families like ours send their sons and daughters into a city for a little extra coin. I know my family hasn’t an idea of how we’re treated in the city.” Enna looked back at the fire. “We’re so ignorant out there in the trees, Isi. We’ve no idea the world’s bigger than the walk to a foothill pasture.”

Ani nodded.

“You belong to your family, you know, and if you marry a Forest man, you’ll belong to each other, but never to a community, never to this city. I feel like we creep around the borders, stepping in to live along the west wall like spiders while we’re young and unwed and then stepping out again, back into the shadow of the Forest. If you ask me, I’d rather be there. But

some of these boys, they'd remove fingers to be given a javelin and belong to the city."

Ani glanced around the room. Conrad and Razo played at sticks opposite her, their boyish faces tense in the competition. *But they're nearly men*, she thought. *They should be visiting taverns and hunting and meeting daughters of butchers and tailors*. Yet every night, in clear weather or foul, all the workers left their posts and returned to the safety of the hall.

"It doesn't seem quite fair." Ani felt a moment of regret that she would not be queen of this country after all, would not have a chance to set this injustice right.

"It never did to me," said Enna. "But I don't know much. I just see how things are. And they've been so for a long time, through tales and spells. Who'm I to question the law and the king?"

"You're Enna," said Ani. "That's somebody."

Enna smiled. "So's Isi."

Is she? thought Ani. *Then I'd like to be her. I'd like to be somebody.*

"She is, you are," said Enna, as though she had heard Ani's doubt. She touched Ani's hand. "Thanks for not making fun of me about what I said about the fire. I know it was silly. Razo would've laughed."

"I do kind of the same thing, you know, but with the wind. Is that silly, then, too? I feel as if it's always tugging at my ears and speaking at me kind of desperately, but I can't hear."

"Yeah, that's it," said Enna, "that's how I feel, too."

"There's a story my aunt used to tell me that's about, well, about a lot of things, but to me it was mostly about the wind."

Enna sat squarely in front of Ani and placed her hands in her lap. "You'd better tell it now, goose girl, or I'll bother you about it till next marketday. Hey there, Bettin," said Enna, getting the attention of another girl, "come closer. Isi's telling a story."

Ani nearly blushed from the attention as the other girl joined them, but she lowered her eyes and thought about the words she would say.

"It goes like this. In a farm village far away there's a maiden with hair like the yellow apple, and she works in the fields all day with her head down and her hair dragging alongside so that the tips're black as raven beaks. Sometimes the wind catches her hair and pulls it up into the air, and the maiden looks up to where the wind is going, up to the high pastures where the wild horses run."

Razo approached, glum from losing his game, and asked Enna what they were doing.

"Isi's telling a tale," said Bettin. "Sit and listen."

"One day her mother says, 'Go to the high pastures, you lazy girl. Go and bring back dry wood for a cookfire.' So the maiden runs out of the fields she knows and up to the high pastures, and she pulls up the dead roots of a lightning-struck tree. But underneath, deep in the dark soil, you know what she finds? A nugget of gold that's growing like a potato. The maiden knows she should dig it up and take it to her mother, but she's heard of the mystery of the wild horses, and so crouches nearby and waits. The horses come."

"What horses?" said Razo. "What mystery?"

"Shut your hole, Razo, and just listen," said Enna.

Ani wished she had not started, because now the hall was quieting, and many of the workers nearby were turning toward her. Enna prodded her knee and smiled, telling her to continue. She took a deep breath and fought to remember her aunt's words, but she could remember only images. The words were her own. She let them come.

"Wild horses, white as light on water, tall as cherry trees. They love to run, so fast they think they can become the wind if they just keep running. They run by the maiden, and the wind of their running blows her hair around her.

"And then one horse sees a flash of gold, and he stops. He paws away the soil, nudges the gold from the ground, and chews it up, fast as a carrot. Gold-colored spittle drips from his chin, his eyes are brighter, he shakes his mane. Now when he breathes out, there's music. This's why she waits."

"What kind of music?" said Bettin.

"It's music more beautiful than a woman, more beautiful than a tree. It's almost as beautiful as the horses that run, so fast and so wild because they want to become the wind. The song's the sound of that wanting, of the wish for loosing of manes, and hooves that don't touch the ground, and breath that doesn't end."

Bettin smiled, and Ani raised her head and met the eyes of those who were listening.

"The maiden returns every day to pull up roots and dig up rooted gold and hear the horses breathe out the music of flight. Every night she goes home and her mother beats her with a switch for not working the fields, and her back's bent like the snow-heavy birches, and she thinks about those

horses who've never been broken, not like her. But now she's heard that song, and she disobeys her mother and returns every day. The song's so beautiful that pain doesn't hurt."

"I think I know what that means," someone whispered.

"Then one day, there's no more gold. The maiden pulls up roots until her fingers bleed, and she digs in the dirt with her fingernails, but the ground's empty. When the horses run by, they don't stop, and she puts her face on the ground and cries.

"The tears clear her thoughts, and she sits up. My hair, she thinks. I know what to do. So she goes to the snow-melt stream and washes the dirt from her hair, and it shines like a sunrise on a still pond. Then she takes a leather knife and cuts it off, all, right from her head, and puts it on the ground. She sleeps by it all night and doesn't feel cold.

"The next day the horses pass. Their running feels like earthquakes and sounds like thunder, and they don't stop for her hand-cut gold. But before her heart breaks, the last horse stops. He paws at her loose hair and looks up and sees her. Then, slowly, as though it's a handful of hay, he eats her golden mane. This time when he breathes out, the song that's on the air pierces her heart like a terrible, perfect knife. The horse shimmers and begins to run, faster and faster, and his white hide becomes whiter and whiter until it's too brilliant to see. There's a flash, and when she blinks, the horse is gone and a white-maned wind whinnies and prances and pushes around her. And the maiden mounts that wind and is borne away, up into the higher pastures, up and never seen again."

The hall was quiet. The hearth fire snapped at the silence, and the flames lowered themselves inside the glowing embers. Ani waited.

"She was never seen again," said Enna.

"What does that mean?" Beier whispered to Conrad. "Did she become wind, too?"

Conrad shrugged.

"It's true?" said Bettin.

"I don't think it's supposed to be true or false. My aunt told it to me a long time ago."

"I don't get it," said Conrad.

"Well, thanks be for that," said Enna, a protective hand on Ani's shoulder. "If you had to get every story ever told, we'd be in short supply."

Conrad's face flushed, and he turned to Ani. "Well, what's it supposed to mean? Horses eating gold and turning into wind. It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know," said Ani. She looked at her hands. "I guess I never really knew what it meant, I just thought it was beautiful. I remember when my mother overheard my aunt tell me a story like that one, my mother was mad. But my aunt said, if we don't tell strange stories, when something strange happens we won't believe it."

"That's true," said Razo. "I haven't heard much of strange stories for years, and when Ideca served us rotten cold bean soup for the third time last week, I couldn't believe it myself."

"Isi said something *strange*, Razo," said Enna. "Ideca's cold bean soup three times is as ordinary as your boots smelling of sheep dung."

Bettin rose and yawned. "You'd best tell another story tomorrow, Isi, or I mayn't believe my dreams tonight."

A murmur of assent passed through the hall, and most nodded their heads. Tomorrow, and every night, tell a tale.

The night air was dark and heavy in after-rain when Ani left the hall for her room. The moon cleared a scrap of sky, and the moonlight turned the outside of her windowpane into a silver mirror. She stooped there a moment, examining her eyebrows to see if marketday would require another purchase of thornroot. They were dark brown, though perhaps fading from the darker color of a month before.

Ani glanced at her full face and stopped. It was the first time she had looked at herself since the morning she had left her mother's palace. Her face was emphasized by the headscarf, rounder and paler, but, she was surprised to see, not sadder. This reflection seemed more significant than the one she had often seen in the palace mirrors, staring back in simple boredom.

She looked at her face now as she might study a coin from a foreign country, deciphering what it was worth and what it could buy her. The reflection was not unkind, though it appeared raw and untested in the bleached light. She thought now it was time to be tested, to make decisions and find her own roads, to stop falling where she was told to fall and to stand only when allowed to stand.

"I would break my mother's heart," she whispered. She remembered her mother saying those words the day she left, and the memory brought a grim

smile. The handkerchief, that peculiar tie to her mother's heart, was gone. It had been temporary, artificial. Her mother had never given her heart, Ani thought, just three drops of blood, blood that could be washed away, a handkerchief that could be lost. She had leaned against the idea of her mother's perfection all her childhood, as though it were the cane to her lameness. But that crutch had not served her.

She was little like her mother, though that was all she had ever longed to be. She lacked the gift of people-speaking, that power to convince and control that laced every word her mother uttered. She did not possess that grace and beauty that all in a room turned to watch. But had the queen ever told a nursery story to a room of captivated listeners? Or handled fifty head of geese? Ani smiled at the thought, and then she surprised herself by feeling proud. *I've done that much. What more can I do?*

Chapter 11

The dawn sun cut through the rain-cleaned air, and it seemed to pierce the eyes and skin, quick and impatient. Ani wore her orange rose tunic and skirt and her hat with the orange ribbon, feeling like the resplendent lizards and frogs from the south that men sold in tiny cages to rich marketgoers. Razo said if you licked the sticky flesh of the frogs, you saw colors bright as their skin. *What a strange city*. She thought about lizards and merchants and the bright, scoured air to keep from thinking about where she was going.

Into a trap, she thought. But she did not want to wait for a safe time to address the king. She must find a way to see Falada—today.

The palace sat like a ponderous beast in the shadows of morning, rising ever taller, gaining width and art and intricacies as she approached and as the sun lit out its stony features. Already a serpentine queue of marketday supplicants reached near the palace gate. Ani stopped behind the last person, just as she had on this day one month ago, but this time when the line moved forward, she slipped out to the inside of the palace wall. She passed several guards and errand boys along the cold shadow of the wall, and they nodded, greeting the goose girl as a fellow laborer. She nodded back and began to smile at the simplicity of the break-in as she neared the stables.

The horse fields were cut into the back of the palace hill, acres long and just as wide. The grandeur of the palace gardens to the east competed for attention, with autumn roses and ice blue fountains and trees hanging their leafy heads low like long-haired waiting maids drying their tresses at a fire. But to Ani's eyes, the horse grounds were more beautiful.

Ani scurried to the nearest stable and ducked in. A worker passed her by without looking up, and she jogged down the long line of stalls, searching for a white head and mane. No luck. She jogged to the next building, where there were no workers and the stalls were nearly empty. She checked each one, calling, *Falada, Falada*, in her mind. There was one sleeping white mare that made her heart leap in her chest before she saw clearly that this was not the horse she knew.

Ani had finished investigating the far side of stalls when the hushed tones of a familiar accent froze her where she stood.

“In here, you dog,” he said.

Ani dropped to the straw floor and held her breath. They were a long way down, but his voice echoed on the high roof, and she could clearly hear the Kildenrean accent.

“Now just listen to me for a moment, before it’s Ungolad that is setting you straight. There is no time for pranks and pleasantries. The princess is not in yet, if you understand me.”

“We are here. I don’t see what all the hush-hush fuss is still about.”

“You dull-witted bumble.” This was the first voice, and Ani knew him now. One of her guards, one of Ungolad’s men, a curly-haired soldier named Terne. “This is not over. There is still a marriage to take place. And don’t forget we have the little impostor running around the forest somewhere, sure to shoot off her mouth and require all kinds of doctoring to keep our position. And did you forget that we still have a kingdom one forest away that will be sending emissaries and little sisters and such nuisances? The two masters’ plan for dealing with that is still not enacted.”

“Yes, but I don’t see why all the sneaking still, and no travel and no fun. I feel like a chicken in a cramped coop and Ungolad checking my unders for fresh eggs.”

There was a sound of a brief scuffle, and the second man quieted. “Look,” said Terne, sounding as though he spoke through clenched teeth, “are you begging for a private audience with her puissantness? Is that what you want? I’m telling you to be sober for a while. You pick a side and you stay on it, you hear me, Hul?”

The conversation went quiet when she heard a third person enter the stable.

“Sirs,” said a Bayern accent.

“Yes, morning,” said Terne, and the two men left.

Ani sat still, feeling each heartbeat rage in her chest. If those two men had spotted her, darkened eyebrows and a wide-brimmed hat would not hide her identity. They could escort her to a nearby wood without trouble, run her through, and leave her body to be disposed of by wild beasts. The fear lodged in her throat ran to her knees, making them shake under her weight as she stood up.

The men were gone. There were five more stables to be searched. She shook herself and continued on. On the way to the third stable, Ani glanced around with a thought that Geric might be near and was stopped short by

what she saw. No need to continue the search. There was her horse. In a far arena, she saw Falada. A stranger rode him, and Falada bucked.

She walked toward him. All around her were horsemen, stable-hands, guards, ladies walking with sunshades, pages. She did not meet their eyes and kept her head slightly bent to the weight of the shadow on her face. She could hear him neighing now, a savage sound she had never heard him utter before, and it made her stomach feel like a stone.

Falada, she said, *what is wrong?*

The rider held the reins tight to his mane. Falada's neck was sweating, and his head was thrown up with wild eyes open to redness. He looked at Ani.

Ani reached the fence and stood beside it, hugging the wooden rail and calling to her horse.

"That cursed thing won't break," said a stable-hand.

The rider only grunted, working on getting the horse to make a circle, but Falada lunged as though he had never seen a rider, as though wearing the saddle were torture.

Calm, Falada, calm. They might hurt you if you do not tame.

The horse kept one ear pointed at her as he pounded to the far side of the corral, but he spoke no words. Ani's head felt tight and heavy. She could not reason why he ignored her words. Or how he had forgotten how to hear them.

The rider was flung from the saddle, and he darted away from the stallion's striking hooves. Ani slid between the fence rails and approached. Falada trotted to a halt and watched. Her hand was held out, her palm up.

Falada, remember? Do you remember me?

He snorted, and his eye roved like a tormented thing. She thought he wanted to speak, but no word entered her head.

Falada, friend, all is well. Peace. All is well.

The horse sniffed at her palm, and her hand trembled under his breath. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and cry into his mane, as she had after finding her father prostrate under his horse, as she had when the mournful cries of Rianno-Hancery stripped away her vigor until she felt small and thin and unable to take another step after the funeral wagon. Who would comfort her at the loss of Falada? The thought broke into a sob, and she clenched her teeth and stepped closer in.

Easy, easy. She ran her hand slowly from his nose to his cheek and down his neck, hoping to awaken his old self with her touch. His skin shuddered under her hand. She held still, afraid to spook him. *Peace*, she said. *No harm.*

Falada jerked his head up, away from her hands, and rose on his hind legs and pawed the air. She jumped away as a hoof met her cheek. A pair of hands pulled her away and pushed her through a space in the fence.

"Get out of here, girl," said the rider. "You're wanting a knock on the head for acting like that."

"I thought she had him for a minute," said the stable-hand.

"What's wrong with him?" said Ani. Her head throbbed. She watched Falada dance in the corral. The morning around him seemed to dim, and the sunlight on his white coat was so bright that it pierced her eyes until she had to look down.

"He's got the animal dementia." The rider waved her away. "None of your mind, so go on."

Falada was pacing again, and foam hung from his jaw. Ani pressed her hand against her throbbing cheek. Her head felt as hollow as her chest.

Falada, she said.

"You, girl."

Ani turned, expecting to see Ungolad or Terne, but was accosted instead by a palace attendant, who grabbed her elbow and walked her swiftly toward the palace. "Another lost supplicant? Moseying about the horse grounds like it was your own court."

"I'm just—"

"Just lost," he said. "I know, and I don't care. Not allowed." He shut his mouth and would say no more.

Ani nearly fell flat as she struggled to keep his pace and to loosen his grip on her arm. The speed and the pain made her angry. *For trying to calm my own horse I'm treated like a criminal*, she thought. Across the field, Ani spotted Hul and Terne in conference under a garden tree, and she stopped tugging at her captive arm and kept her head down.

The attendant left her in a small room and locked the door behind her. It seemed to be a cell for criminals—bare, empty, cold. A small window high on one wall threw a square of light onto the stone floor. Ani sat in that bit of sun in the middle of the room, wrapped her arms around herself, and cried silently for some time. She did not know if she shivered from the cold room

or the sound of booted feet in the corridor. She jumped at every sound and waited for a guard to open the door. Her aching head did not allow her to think of Falada.

When she finally heard the noise of a key in the lock, Ani was so exhausted of being afraid that she barely made herself stand. She had followed the square of sunlight's movements closer to the wall until it had disappeared with noon. She leaned against the wall and squinted in the half-light, waiting to make out Ungolad's form in the opening door. It was a woman.

"Come on," the woman said. Ani submitted her wrist to the attendant and was pulled up stairs and to a more decorous level. "I'd forgotten that man brought you in, it's such a busy day, marketday and all, but the king usually sits in judgment today, so let's see if we can't slip you in and out of our hair."

They waited in a wood-paneled corridor that Ani guessed ran beside the king's receiving chamber. She could hear the king's large voice and the high tones of a supplicant, and for the first time that morning, Ani thought she might leave the palace alive.

After a few minutes, the attendant signaled to the chamber-mistress then escorted Ani through the side entrance to stand under the noon roof window before the king.

"Not an assassin, I hope." There was tired humor in his voice.

"No, sire, a supplicant who lost her way," said the attendant, "and was found on the royal equine grounds, putting her hands to tame the princess's demented stallion."

At the word *demented*, Ani winced.

"Leave," said the king and the attendant withdrew. Ani raised her head and looked him in the face, and his countenance softened. He was not a handsome man, though the thoughts of good looks of youth remained like a reflection of a face on glass. She thought he might be as gentle as her own father with children, but more strict. He motioned for her to step forward.

"Ah, the new goose girl," he said. "With the comely curtsy. Where's that curtsy now?"

"It was difficult, sire, with one arm held at my back." Ani was not certain she had hidden the irritation and fear from her voice, but she gave a low curtsy. The king smiled.

“Hmm, now, when last you were here, you requested a post in the stables, and were denied, and now you’re found there—accidentally. Was it accidentally, my girl?”

“No, sire, I never claimed it was.”

“Ah.” He had seemed bored when she first saw him addressing complaints, and now he leaned forward with an expression that was almost amused.

“I’m brimful of guesses,” he said, “but, for time’s sake, why don’t you report your reason, straight and simple.”

“I . . . I wanted to see the princess’s horse, and when I saw him I was sorry, for he was terrorized in the spirit, and I climbed the fence because I was confident I could help him.”

“And did you help him?”

“No,” said Ani. She thought of Falada’s eye, dim as a cow’s, looking at her before his hoof struck. “I think, I think he’s beyond the place where human and animal share language.”

Then she forgot the image of the tormented horse and became aware of the king’s critical gaze.

“Sire,” said the chamber-mistress, warning him of time and of a queue that waited.

“Yes, well, young goose girl, you’ll explain to me one day what precisely that means. As for now, there must be a damage of some kind for the trespass, or by next week’s end we might have a city of citizens strolling the palace grounds to sightsee mad horses and trample the royal rosebushes. Do you support a family in the forest?”

“No.” *My family’s in Kildenree*, she wanted to say. *I’m Anidori-Kiladra, I’m the princess*. But her stomach clenched with dread and warning. *Not now. It would not be wise. He would not believe.*

“Then, the month’s salary will do. Do you carry it with you?”

The workers had been paid the night before marketday. She took from her apron pocket the thin, gold coin stamped off-center with a running horse and handed it to the king.

“One steed? That’s all? Well, we can’t deprive you of that entire trivial sum. Counselor! Can you make change?”

A counselor approached, pouring coins from a pouch into his palm.

“It’s a sad state when the king doesn’t own a copper.” The king plucked a silver and a copper coin from the counselor’s hand and gave them to Ani.

“There you are. No complaints, no return to the stables, and off you go.”

“Sire,” said Ani. She stood awkwardly a moment, waiting for his attention to return to her. “What’s to become of the horse, the princess’s horse gone wild?”

“I don’t know.” He spoke with sudden severity, and her head throbbed anew with the bruise Falada had given. “The king doesn’t concern himself with other persons’ horses. Dismissed.”

Ani walked out of the palace gates and beyond sight of the guards before she stopped and sighed that she was free. She rested her shoulder against a wall and pressed her bruised cheek to the cold stones. Touch made the spot pound with her pulse as though Falada hit her again and again.

Falada had turned mad.

The realization was as real as the pain. Perhaps the cause was what he had seen in the Forest. Or after he had been used to present the false princess to Bayern, and Selia no longer had use of him, perhaps then she or Ungolad had done—something. Ani winced away from the thought. She decided she wanted to feel the pain in her head, so she left the cool wall and walked. The general movement of the people pulled her down a wide avenue, and she did not slow until she reached the first ring of the market.

The market-square was an enormous circle of noise and people that enveloped the central square and several streets beyond. She walked carefully through the fringed outer loop, a circle of beggars who sat on ragged blankets and displayed maimed limbs and sickly children like wares for sale. Some shook tin cups of coins, a noise like babies’ rattles.

The next ring of the market belonged to the performers, groups of children with their arms around shoulders singing lays of heroes or tavern songs, and men strumming lap harps and playing wood flutes, and women in tight trousers (that made Ani blush and look away) who stood on their head and on others’ shoulders, and the magicians with their juggling balls and dancing wood-men.

The third loop was formed by the food vendors with their steaming pockets full of buns and women with baskets on their heads, and some, the richer ones, with wooden carts and an extra man to watch for food pinchers. Pigeons pecked at the ground and croaked warnings to each other—*My bread, my rind, my plum, stay away, stay away*. Ani saw a chunk of pork fall to the ground and was tempted to coo back at them, *My meat, stay away*. She had not yet broken her fast. Regretfully, she breathed in the smell

of the sausage breads, hot cabbage salads, and syrup apples and kept walking.

And then she saw in the inner ring, surrounded by the sellers of goods, a platform where two men swung a little on their neck ropes. A man passed her waving muttonchops, and the smell twisted her stomach. She held her breath and hurried on.

Ani found Finn's group near the center of the square with their backs to the execution. She turned her back as well and came up behind them. There was an appreciable crowd bartering for Gilsa's knitted goods and the other forest wares. The day had dawned with a real autumn chill, and the people's minds turned to winter and what the Forest dwellers knew of the cold. No one seemed to mind that the goods were a bit damp from yesterday's rainstorm, and Ani imagined Finn and his neighbors camped in the drizzle around a flooded fire pit and thought to be grateful for her thin metal roof.

Finn came to her immediately. His mien betrayed concern, and she realized that it was mirroring her own.

"I'm in trouble." She pulled him apart from the others and spoke in her natural, unused voice, dropping the pretense of accent. "I need to tell someone that, and I'm so confused, and there is nothing to be done, except listen and wait, and be careful."

The boy patted her shoulder.

"They killed my friend, or near enough." She bit her lip, hard, to keep from crying. "They want to kill me. I can't go home, and I am so tired of being afraid."

Ani sobbed once and put her head on Finn's shoulder, letting herself be held a moment, be told it was all right, and imagine what it would be like to be safe and known and cared for. She did not allow herself another sob. She stood straight and laughed to disguise the sensation of crying that still hung in her throat.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Two men came to the Forest," said Finn.

"Fair-haired?" she asked.

Finn nodded. "They asked after a yellow-haired girl, and Mother said she never saw one and wouldn't let one cross her gate if she did."

Ani heaved a breath and nodded.

"The way to my mother's house is the southwest Forest road called Lake, and then right toward the sign that says Spruces, and then other roads that

go second on left, third on right, fifth on right, or you can ask anyone around there."

Ani repeated the way aloud several times to commit it to memory. They were looking for her. They did not think she was dead. They thought she was hiding. Fear tugged in her chest, but she pushed it down. No more. She took out the king's silver coin and gave it to Finn.

"I came here to give this to you, not to cry," she said. "For your mother, just part of all that I owe her."

Finn took the coin but handed in exchange a brown paper-wrapped package from the cart. "From Mother."

It was a deliciously thick pullover of Forest wool, in orange, brown, and blue, and on the back was the design of a yellow bird, wings out in flight. Unlike most of the other pullovers, he had somehow managed to keep it dry. She held it to her face and appreciated its warmth and the smell like a smoky fireside and the raw wool and wood floor of that safe shed where she had slept in the Forest.

"I can see that one can never pay back Gilsa for the fear that she will give again."

As she left the market, spending her copper on a warm bun and a tracked-down thornroot, Ani saw that the hanged men had been transferred from the central platform to the city wall. It was long used to bearing the dead and was marked with the thin, dark blood of past corpses like stripes on a banner of decay. She swallowed the last, hard bit of bread and hurried past.

Chapter 12

Days later, Jok was still angry at Ani for leaving him in the pen two nights. She stood outside the pasture arch, counting the orange beaks as the geese waddled through, and she heard Jok's familiar honk on the far side of the group, letting her know that he would not be sitting on her lap again that day. He was a true goose, and Ani was lonely under her beech, passing the time picking out words of goose speech and practicing new words to the wind.

At noon, when Conrad had crossed the hedge to the sheep boys' field on his daily wanderings, Ani heard hoofbeats. It was one man on a dark horse, and he rode directly to her tree. Her muscles shook quietly, but she stayed still and watched the shadow of his hat move on his face until she recognized him.

"Goose girl," Geric called out.

She stepped out from behind the tree and leaned against its smooth gray trunk. Geric dismounted and walked the horse to her, one hand resting on the neck of his mare.

"I don't know your name," he said.

"I'm called Isi," she said.

"Isi. That suits you better than goose girl, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Yes, sorry that I didn't know, before. Isi."

"That's all right. I didn't tell you."

"No, you didn't, did you."

"No."

"Hmm," he said. And coughed.

The conversation halted, Geric staring at a print his boot left in the still wet ground, Ani looking off toward the geese as though they might flee to the woods if not under her constant gaze. He cleared his throat and said the beginning of a word, then stopped and lowered his brow. Ani noticed that he had an expressive brow and eyes the color of warmed honey. She looked away from him to the horse.

"Not the bay," she said. At her words, he looked up gratefully.

“No,” he said, “I traded him for one a mite tamer. I thought after my embarrassing display, it was clear the beast needed to be handled by a master. Did I do well?”

“Surely,” she said, surprised he sought her approval.

He was quiet again, and she waited.

“I came here for two days,” he said, “but you were gone, and the geese were gone, and I thought I was mistaken and it was a different pasture where we met.”

“No, but it was raining, and then it was marketday, of course. Don’t you go to market? And you came in the rain?”

Geric laughed a little. “I was wretched wet, and so were the flowers.”

He looked at her curiously, paused, and then deluged her with explanations. “I’m such a dunce, truly I am, and I went home that night after we spoke and you rode the horse, and I made that terrible error, made you feel as though I thought you were of less worth than a stone, I’m sure. Well, you know, I felt like a kingly dolt, as I should’ve. I hadn’t a right to come here and ride around like a fool and insult you and leave without explanation, except that I’ve never met a goose girl before, and you’re not what I expected, though that’s no explanation, I know. Still, I thought I’d better come back and bring you flowers, because I read that a gentleman gives a lady flowers, and I thought maybe I’m not a gentleman, but no reason not to treat you like a lady, isn’t that so?”

He waited for her to answer.

“Yes,” she said. It seemed the only answer to give. He nodded, relieved.

“Well, the rain made them a mess, the flowers, half of them bald of petals and the stems weak as noodles, and I was beginning to think that flowers were a silly idea, that you’d think, I don’t know what, but I kept them all week because the last couple of days I couldn’t escape to come and explain, and yesterday the flowers just flat died. So when I left today I didn’t have any flowers, and wasn’t sure I’d find you anyhow, so I grabbed what I could find, and it was food.” He pulled a potato sack off the back of his saddle and showed the contents: apples, a loaf of potato bread, cold ham, and a leather pouch filled with custard.

“What you could find? This’d be a feast in the workers’ hall. Are you a kitchen-man, then?”

“No, thanks be, or I could never escape so often as I do.” He gave her half a grin as he spread out their feast on the sack. “I should confess

something to you. Some of the palace guards bet me that I couldn't tame that bay, and if you had taken him for a time, I would've claimed credit for his taming."

Ani gasped and smiled. "You would not."

Geric laughed a little, bowing his head, and nodded. "Yes, yes, I probably would've. You may not know what terrible ego beatings we men give each other."

"So, you're a guard?"

"Yes, that's right."

Now why couldn't he have been one of mine? But if he were her guard, she would be a princess, and just then she wanted to be someone who sits in a pasture with another someone and eats cold ham on potato bread. So they did. After a time, he lost the halting manner of his apology, and they talked so long and easily that Ani's throat went dry and she wished for water. He wanted to know all about how she passed her time. When he learned that his picnic was the first noon dinner she had eaten as a goose girl, Geric swore he would bring her dinner every day.

"If I ruled, you'd all dine," he said.

"Would that you were king."

Jok rushed toward her, honking all the way as though he would bite her, but she honked once to stop his advance, and he turned and waddled away.

"What was all that?" asked Geric, standing.

"Jok, my little friend. He's angry that I've left him in the goose pen these past nights. He's grown used to sleeping in the crook of my knee."

"Well, I'll have none of that, some brazen bird speaking harsh words to his mistress. After all, I'm a gentleman." He stuck out his tongue in an ungentlemanly face and ran after Jok. The goose soon realized he was being pursued and fled across the field, flying in short spurts and running as fast as his flat feet could propel him. Geric slipped once on the wet grass but quickly regained his feet and grabbed Jok around the middle.

"It's time for an apology," he said, walking back to the beech with Jok in hand. "I've become an expert in apologies today, so I know, little brother, that it's time."

"Careful, Geric, you might—" said Ani as Jok turned his head and bit Geric on the arm. Geric exclaimed and dropped the goose who wasted no time in fleeing the scene. And Ani, despite her experience with goose bruises, could not hold back a laugh.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” said Geric, rubbing his arm, “but I failed to force an apology out of the offending goose.”

“You’re not likely to, either. He’s a naughty bird. They all are.”

“Poor company.”

“Oh, but I like my geese. Like cats, they can’t be told what to do, and like dogs, they’re loyal, and like people, they talk every chance they get.”

“Though they’ll not deliver half so good an apology as I do.”

“Not half so good,” she said.

They laughed together and lay back on the grass, their heads on his rolled cloak, chuckling intermittently and claiming clouds to be ponies and dragons and large-bosomed women. Geric took his leave long after noon. He promised to return the following day if he could, hoisted himself on the mare’s back, and rode away.

“Geric,” she called.

He turned back around.

“What kind of flowers were they?”

“I don’t rightly know,” he said. He made faltering gestures with his hands, forming their size and shape from the air. “They were yellow, and smallish, and had lots of petals.”

“Thank you,” she said. “They were beautiful.”

Ani looked toward the stream and held a branch of her beech tree as she might hold a hand. The river birches were leafing brilliant—hundreds of thin, gold coins dangling from their arms. It was perfect, as though their green leaves had been a falsehood all those months and just now the trees showed their realness, their pure autumnal yellows. Ani felt a stirring, a hope, a winged thing waking up in her chest and brushing her heart with its feathers.



Geric came back the next day, and the next, and more, and they sat in the shade of the tree or walked together along the spongy rim of the goose pond, the birds moving at their feet like incarnations of the bright white words that fell from their mouths.

“How do you get away so often?” said Ani.

“When the prince doesn’t go out, I’ve nothing to do. I’m his guard.”

“Oh. What’s he like?”

Geric grinned. “Oh, he’s a nice enough lad, but not half as charming as I am.”

Yes, she thought, *I’m certain you’re right.*

He was ignorant of goose-keeping and listened with interest as Ani explained what she knew. When she mentioned how much time she sat alone, the next day Geric brought her books on Bayern history and some tales of courtly love, evil, and justice. He was afraid at first that he had erred again and that she had never learned to read, and then he was relieved that she had.

Ani in turn wanted to know about the palace, and after some days, she had the courage to ask after its newest members.

“The Kildenreans,” he said. “A quiet lot, keep to themselves, very grave, earnest men. The senior man, the braided one, he beats the palace guards regularly at sword matches on the training grounds. I’ve never faced him, though I’d like a go. I’ve seen him beat three men consecutively, and my arm hurts just to watch.” He rubbed his upper arm distractedly where Jok had bit him.

“Hmm, maybe you should challenge him to a horse-breaking match instead,” she said.

“Easy, easy, my lady, for your tongue’s losing its gentility from speaking too long to geese.”

At that, he tossed a handful of grass blades at her, which she tossed back, until Jok appeared, snipping at the falling grass with an eager beak. The goose could not long hold a grudge.

“What of the princess? The boys here, they call her the yellow girl.”

Geric smiled, amused. “Princess Anidori-Kiladra.”

A cold tickle burst in her stomach at Geric speaking her own name. “You’ve met her, of course, being the prince’s guard.”

“Yes, I have. Before she came, the prince took to pacing the floor while trying to memorize her name. Princess Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee. They take the names of their grandmothers there—Talianna, Isilee. Nice sentiment, though it makes for a long name.”

Ani coughed, feeling self-conscious of the name Isi, and quickly said, “Shouldn’t a princess have a long name, just as she should have a long life?”

“Yes, I suppose.” He flung one stray blade of grass her way. She picked it up and ran her finger up its smooth side.

“She’s lovely and graceful and witty and courtly, and all that a princess should be.” Geric shrugged, and he no longer smiled. “But there was some darkness with her arrival. I didn’t know that relations were so drawn between the two countries, but they’re more tenuous than I think anyone’d thought.”

Yes, thought Ani, *because Kildenree wishes to be left alone and the Bayern greedily cut through the mountains*. She wondered if her city would ever be safe. She doubted that even were she to eventually marry Bayern’s prince that their alliance could bind this country to peace, this country where they hanged their dead criminals on their walls and only honored a man who carried a javelin and shield. She did not speak aloud of this to Geric. She was a goose girl and thought perhaps she should not know of such things as maps and borders and war.

One morning in midweek, Geric arrived in the pasture with not only dinner in a potato sack, but an extra horse, a chestnut gelding two hands shorter than his black mare—a lady’s horse.

“They’re both pretty tame. Not that I don’t think you could handle a bit more, but I didn’t think I could.” He grinned, and his face was a different kind of handsome from his thoughtful stare.

Ani took the chestnut’s reins in silence and stood a moment before him, allowing the horse to sniff at her hands and neck and look over his rider. Geric stood by and watched. Ani waited for his approval, patted him down on both sides, then mounted. She was careful that her skirts did not rise above her ankles.

“By the way, Geric, um, did you see my shift that first day, when I rode the bay?”

Geric bowed his head. “I saw a bit of your leg.”

“You saw my leg?”

“How can a man help what he sees?” he said. “And, if I could add, you possess a very fine leg.”

Ani felt her face go hot and was too shocked to speak a word. Geric shook his hands in front of him in a feigned gesture of innocence.

“I’m just a gentleman and sworn to truth, and that’s my defense.”

“Your defense is you’re an idle guard who leaves his prince to seek out maidens to spy on.” She tried to still a smile, and when it threatened to push through her defenses, she nudged the horse forward.

They let their mounts canter for a bit, dashing back and forth across the pasture. From that height Ani could see Conrad's orange cap at the far end of the sheep pasture, so she dared lead Geric across the stream and into the beginning wood on the other side, as she had seen noble men and women do many times on clear autumn mornings.

They rode through the thickening evergreens, stepping over the scattered sunlight that bled through the canopy to the forest floor, windblown river birch leaves gleaming like loose coins caught in a ray of light. A cold wind came from the heart of the wood and washed over Ani's hands. She halted. The trees, the shadows, the chill, called to mind another afternoon in a forest. Talone's howled rage, Adon's sword-tipped chest, the scream of the stallion that bore a slash down his rump, the pressure of Ungolad's hand on her ankle.

"What's wrong?" asked Geric, and he leaned toward her.

The wind moved over her hand like a searching thing.

"Nothing." She flinched, and the wind left her hand like a feather blown from a palm. She shook her head and told herself that the wind was not speaking to her and that this was not the forest that was full of death and betrayal. Nothing in this wood put bodies on those thin memories and made flesh what was nightmare. In fact, she discovered, there was a comfort in the close trees. And just being on horseback again gave a confidence to her entire body. She smiled. "Nothing. This is perfect."

Geric tipped his head. "Someday you'll have to tell me what that expression on your face means when you look at these trees."

They rode on until Ani expressed concern that the geese had been too long unattended. When they returned to the stream bank, Geric halted.

"Do you dare race a man, my lady?" he said.

Ani only smiled. As one they kicked their horses into a run. Their horses splashed through the stream, wetting boots and hems, and then galloped up the pasture. The riders leaned low on their horses' necks and hollered against the wind and the sound of hooves pounding at the late autumn grass. The wall stopped them, and they gasped for breath between laughs and held their shaking stomachs.

"I won," said Geric, fighting to speak while exhaling.

"You . . . did . . . not," said Ani. "And your horse is taller."

They finished laughing and caught their breaths, and looked at each other, and Ani thought Geric looked at her too long, as though he forgot he

was looking, as though he did not wish to do anything else. She looked back. Her heart took its time quieting down.

That night, Ani told the workers a story of a woman who loved a man, and when he married another, she turned into a bird and sang such sad songs to his window that his bride died of the heartbreaking sound. The hall was quiet at the tale, and when Ani left for her room, Razo just patted her shoulder and looked down.

The evening was caught in the early dark of near winter. The city was so empty and still, it seemed no creature had ever walked those stones. Ani stopped in the street outside her window. Silvery moonlight made her pane a mirror. She sought the lines and curves of her mother's face—her mother, who was beautiful. *Do others want to look at me?* she wondered. *Did he?* She put a hand to her cheek. Her face was gray, unsure, shadowed. She did not know if she was beautiful.

"Work here long enough and you can convince Ideca to give you a table mirror."

Ani straightened. Enna stood a few doors down, entering her own room.

"I didn't know you were there," said Ani. She hurried through her own door and sat on the bed beside Jok, feeling flustered and stupid. Jok made the sounds indicating he was ready to sleep, so she took off her hat and unwound her hair, scratched her head, and sighed. The weight of her hair on her back reminded her that she was not who she was. That she was a secret.

She turned at a movement. Her curtains were open, and Enna stood at the window, staring, her eyes wide like an owl's.

"Oh," said Enna.

Ani put a hand to her uncovered hair, stepped forward, and opened the door. "Please come in," she said, and closed her curtains.

Enna sat beside her on the bed.

"I'm getting pretty careless, I guess," said Ani. "I've become so used to being a goose girl, I forget to worry."

"I just came to apologize. I didn't mean to see." Enna put out her hand and fingered an end of Ani's long yellow hair. "That's why you always wear a hat or a scarf. But your eyebrows?"

"Dyed," said Ani.

Enna ran a finger across Ani's brow and looked at her clean fingertip. She gave a little laugh and shook her head.

"If I tell you about me, can you keep it secret?"

“Yes, of course,” said Enna.

So Ani whispered the story, because she knew of no other way to buy Enna’s trust. She told it backward, forgetting which parts might be most important, and realized that she was better at telling imaginary tales than her own true one. The story began with the fact that she was a goose girl because the king gave her the job, because she had come to the city from the Forest, where she had been lost. She got lost when her company had mutinied, and there had been a massacre—she stumbled over that part—and her horse had witnessed it and gone mad. The reason they had rebelled against her was that her friend, her lady-in-waiting, had designs to rob her name, her title, and then kill her. And her title was, her title had been, princess.

“From Kildenree,” said Ani, with true accent. “My mother was, is, the queen.” She felt awkward saying it, like bragging, like saying she was something that she was not, sitting there in her goose girl boots in her room built right on the hard street against the city wall.

“Princess,” Enna said quietly.

The candle had sputtered out midtale, and Enna’s face was a dark shape on darkness, a faint, silvery line of cheek and chin. Ani wished to see her expression, to see if her brow lifted in surprise or her eyes tightened in doubt, or if the darkness bedded beneath her eyes and in the lines between nose and mouth, a wrinkle of deep thought, of betrayal.

“So,” said Ani.

“Do you want,” said Enna, still whispering, “should I bow to you? Princess?”

Ani gasped. “No. Please, no. I’m just waiting to see if you believe me.”

“Believe you? Mercy, Isi.”

Then Enna had questions, and they flowed in a fast current, scarcely giving Ani time to respond. About the Forest, and the kingdom, and the thornroot that could darken hair, and her horse—she could speak with him?—and how evil were those guards and how black must be their desires to spur them to murder. Ani answered every question. She felt safe there, in the absolute dark, Jok asleep in her lap, Enna’s hand occasionally bridging the blackness to touch her knee, the warm conversation filling up the dark space like heat fills the air around a fire.

Enna ran out of questions, and they sat quiet again, each thinking, seeing in the dark the bright images of a white horse and red blood and green trees,

and on top of it all, a high, turreted palace with blind eyes.

"It must be past midnight," said Ani.

Enna agreed.

"You've been very kind to listen," said Ani, slipping back into her Bayern accent, which she discovered felt natural to her now. "And, I'm sorry if I've ever been unkind when you sought my friendship. I'm wary of that now, I think."

"I can see why. Selia." Enna said the last word as though she might spit it. "We've got to get you your name back."

Ani nodded. "I've thought a lot about it. After the first time I met the king, I realized I couldn't go there alone and demand they take my word over Selia's and all her guards'. And I thought, maybe if I was surrounded by people who believed me, I'd be safer and have a better chance of convincing the king."

"Yes," said Enna, "let's get all the workers together and we'll be your guard and make the king listen. They can't kill all of us, right?"

Ani pressed her lips together. "Yes, that's what I think sometimes, and then I remember Adon and Talone, and Dano the cook, and the others. There were a lot of them, too, and Ungolad's friends killed them all."

"Oh," said Enna.

"For a time I thought that idea was my best hope, but the more time I spend in the workers' hall, I know that I can't risk your lives."

"Not even Conrad's?" Enna tilted her head as though it were an appealing idea.

Ani laughed quietly. "It's my trouble. Even if some of the workers were willing to go to battle on this, I don't think it'd be right to endanger their lives just to get back my name."

"Maybe," said Enna, smothering a yawn.

"We should sleep, I guess."

"Yes, don't worry, we'll figure it out."

"Enna," said Ani as the girl rose to leave, "those guards would kill me if they knew I was here."

"I know," she said. "I won't tell anyone. You'll see that I won't. And Isi . . . can I still call you Isi? It fits you. I want to tell you how I believe you. I don't know why. I wouldn't believe Razo if he pricked his finger and told me he was bleeding, and your story's almost as crazy as your bedtime tales, but I really do believe you. And when you get tired of worrying and

mourning your horse and trying not to be afraid, tell me and I'll do it for you a while so you can shut your eyes and sleep peaceful."

Chapter 13

The next afternoon, Ani awaited Geric's visit, her ears so attuned to the distant sounds of hooves on cobbled streets that she did not hear Jok calling after her until he stood by her side. She tore grass for him and plucked loose feathers from his tail, setting aside the quills for the bundle Tatto would collect later that week. *Perhaps*, she thought, *the king or prince himself will use the quills I gather here*, and again she wondered what the prince might be like, though she found it not half so interesting as thinking about what Geric was like.

She was planning to tell Geric. Enna had believed, and so might others. Geric could help her with Falada. And if he had the prince's ear, perhaps he could convince him of her identity. She tripped on that thought. Is that what she wanted? To marry this prince and live the rest of her life with Geric standing as the silent guard at her husband's side? *No, no, there must be a better solution than that.*

When he finally came, Ani waited by the tree and watched his approach. Geric was tall, and he rode his mare with a height and ease that made Ani feel proud. She often thought of him as a boy, the way he teased her and chased the geese and got excited over the desserts he brought with dinner. But just then he did not look silly at all—*in fact*, she thought, *in fact, quite handsome*. She smiled at him, but when he neared, she could see that his expression was troubled.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Geric wiped his forehead as though trying to dismiss unpleasant thoughts. "Nothing that should disturb this autumn peace." And he tried to smile.

They walked beside the stream. Geric did not want to talk about the events that shaped his mood, saying only that there was ill gossip at the palace. He looked back to where his horse stood grazing and cursed himself, realizing that he had forgotten to bring dinner from the kitchens.

"Don't mind for me," said Ani.

But he was angry with himself and talked little, and Ani's inclination to confess secrets began to harden in the mood. Soon they sat by a hushed bit of stream, watching the yellow leaves of the autumn birches plate the

surface of the water. Ani looked across the stream, contemplating fording its shallow cold to hunt out late walnuts. Conrad used to bring back pockets full, and the thought woke her stomach to mumble a complaint.

"I'm sorry," said Geric. "I came here today to escape the gloom, and I've brought it with me."

"Let's distract ourselves somehow. I heard that when the princess arrived she rode a fine mount. Can you tell me about her horse?" *My horse. Falada*. The story Enna knew was in her throat, eager.

Geric sighed. "The white stallion. Not well. I think they'll kill him."

"What?"

"So I've heard."

"But, kill him? No, surely not kill him."

"Yes, I think so. I understand the princess thinks it's best, has said from her arrival that he was a dangerous creature. And he's her horse. It's her choice."

"Oh, Geric." Ani was standing. He noticed her expression and stood beside her.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Geric, can you save the horse?"

"Isi, the king's issued the order. It may've already been done."

Ani stared up at the baring branches, eyes wide to keep them dry. She felt powerless. Geric looked at her with sympathy, perhaps thinking she was just a sweet girl who hated to hear of the mistreatment of any animal. She shook her head, unable to explain.

"Please," she said. "Can you just ask the prince if he'll let him live? It's very important to me. That horse doesn't deserve to die."

"I'll try," he said. "If you'd like, I'll go right now and try."

"Thank you. I wouldn't ask something like this, but I feel like you're a friend, a good friend."

"Isi, I'm so glad I am. These afternoons have been, you know, so nice. More than nice. More than just getting to eat out here and know your geese and talk. It's not like—the palace—it isn't an easy place to be, especially not now, and I'm trying to say that you've been . . . no, you're so, you're —"

He stopped. Looking into his dark eyes was like gazing at a calm river, and in them she saw the reflection of the leaning trees behind her, of golden leaves, of herself crowned by autumn. She lifted her face to him and was

aware of the fullness of the sun on her skin, breaking through the cold air. Geric touched her cheek, smooth as a teardrop, thrilling as a lightning storm. She felt real.

"You are," he said. His hand found hers, and he held her fingers tightly, as though he did not dare to do any more than hold her one hand, and look at her, and breathe deeply. She held his hand in both of hers.

With that touch his countenance changed. He dropped his hand and looked away.

"I should go," he said, already walking to his horse. She stayed by the stream. When he had mounted, he turned back and frowned.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry, Isi." He rode up the hill, through the arch, and disappeared into the stones of the city.



After the dark affirmed it was the middle night, Ani left Jok dozing on her bed, wrapped her hair into Gilsa's blue headscarf, and slipped outside. She had recently oiled the hinge of her door, and it closed silently behind her. It was a long walk to the palace and seemed longer after dark, with nothing to watch but stray cats and closed windows. With every step the cold of the cobblestones pushed up through her boot soles and into her bones. She was wearing Gilsa's pullover. It was bright and patterned, and she felt as obvious as a goose in a murder of crows.

The night guards stopped her at the gate. Of course they would.

"I've been called to the stables," she said. Her forehead itched with cold and sweat, but she did not raise her hand to it.

The lead guard looked her over and then motioned for her to pass. She was a girl, a Forest girl by the look of her head wrap, and not possibly important enough to lie or plot. Ani knew a trusting guard might let an innocuous girl enter alone, but leading a princely, maddened horse back through was another matter. But she had to try.

There were others on the stable grounds—guards, late workers, and sleepless stable-hands. She nodded to those she walked past, and they nodded back. The stable where she had last seen Falada lay at the end of the yard, a painfully long walk that stretched on and on, the distance seemingly unchanged with every step.

When at last she ducked through the fence posts and into the long building, Ani knew it was wrong. There was an odor of stale hay and muck piles without the sharp, warm smell of animal. She ran to the end. Every stall was empty. Ani wiped her forehead with a loose end of the scarf and took a bracing breath. She would have to check every stable. Like the cold, hopelessness pricked at her skin.

She crossed the arena and ducked through the railings. Something caught —an exposed nail, a tether hook—and held a corner of her head wrap. Her fingers were numb from the cold, and she tried to feel it out blindly. Cloth, wood, metal, all felt the same.

"Ho there," said a stable-hand, "what're you doing?"

"I'm caught," she said.

"You shouldn't be here," he said.

Ani tugged harder. He spoke too loudly. Others were looking that way, and she was caught like a hooked fish breathing in cruel, dry air. And then she saw him. Across the field. He had stopped and was looking at her, wondering at the commotion.

"You'd better leave," said the stable-hand.

Two pale braids. That was all she could make out at that distance. Pale braids. Panic seized her, and she had no thought but—away. She pulled herself free, and the scarf fell, long, unraveled, on the hard ground. Her yellow hair shone like silver in the moon-lightened field. All she knew to do then was run.

Ani did not look back. She knew he was behind her. She knew he was stronger, and she was so cold. Her boots hit the ground, and the impact shook her body, but her feet could feel nothing. She was as numb as her fingers, as numb as fear had made her mind. She stumbled and ran. He would be close now. Right there, behind her. Close enough to reach out, to grab her by the neck, to bring her down like a fox on a hen, jaw tight on its throat.

There's something I can do, Ani thought. *There's something.* She could not think what. The wind from her running grabbed at her ears like a child anxious to tell secrets. She strained to understand, but it was just noise, like the chattering of the geese had been all those weeks ago.

Up ahead the guards at the side gate blocked the exit, and another hurried from his post toward the sounds of running.

“That man,” she said as soon as she was close enough to speak, “he’s trying to hurt me. Please.”

The guards turned their attention away from her, and she continued to run, at last outside the palace and into the dark of the sleeping city. She turned back to see Ungolad at the gate and heard him yell in outrage, his pursuit stopped by the warning of javelins pointed at his chest.

Ani did not stop running until the leaning streets eased, and she looked around at unfamiliar buildings and knew she was lost. She rested against a house, her head on her trembling arm, and concentrated on breathing the cold air that stabbed at her throat and lungs like icy fingers. Ungolad knew she was there. They would search now for a Kildenrean girl with long yellow hair. There was fear again. Falada was gone, and all was wrong.

There had been something, an idea, a sensation, something she could have done, something that was stronger than the knife in his hand. Something in the wind. She could not remember, though she tried as she stumbled west on the sleepy streets, hiding behind barrels and piles of refuse when she heard footsteps behind her own, but seeing no one. She finally gained the city wall when the moon had set and followed the wall in utter darkness to her own room. At last, her own safe place.

Ani locked her door, fell on her bed, and was asleep at once. She did not wake until Conrad rapped on her door after breakfast.



Geric did not come that day. Ani waited for him to bring the news of the horse’s death. She could imagine how he would look, what he would say, how his gait would be slower, despondent, each foot reluctant to take a step, his eyes slow to meet her face. But they would meet her face, and he would take her hand again, and all would be well.

He did not come.

After the sun had started its long slope into the hollow of the western sky, Tatto passed through the archway. “I’ve got new boots,” he said, explaining why he picked his way across the grass, carefully avoiding goose droppings. Ani watched with sleepy eyes and a resigned dread.

“I’ve been sent by my chamber-lord to deliver to you a message.” Tatto spoke officially, raising one hand, palm upright, in a stiff gesture of oration.

“Yes, go on,” said Ani. He was inclined toward dramatic pauses.

“Here,” he said. “A letter from someone in the palace.”

The parchment was sealed with a plain pool of wax. Ani broke it and read.

Isi,

Matters here are worse, and the prince needs me at present. At any rate, I think I had better not return to your pasture again. I do not know how to write this. You know, this is my fourth draft of this letter, and I am determined to finish this one even though I will sound like a right fool. So I will just say it. I cannot love you as a man loves a woman. I am so sorry if I have presumed what is not true or have taken liberties with your sentiments. I hope you can forgive me.

Geric

A postscript scratched at the bottom read, “I have failed you twice. The horse you had regard for was already taken away when I arrived yesterday.”

Ani folded the letter and put it in her pocket. Tatto was watching her face. Curiously, Ani did not feel like crying, or running away, or sighing. Instead, she felt anger burst open inside her, an overripe fruit. She felt like picking up the fist-size rock that lay by her foot and throwing it, hard. She did. It made an unsatisfactory thump on the ground.

“Not good news,” said Tatto.

“I should be used to it. But right now I’d like all my troubles to stand in front of me in a straight line, and one by one I’d give each a black eye.”

“Oh.” Tatto stood by, waiting to see what she would do.

She kicked her beech tree. The trunk was as thick as two men, the smooth bark as hard as a city stone. She could not even make the branches shiver. She shouted and kicked it again as hard as she could, knowing she could not even dent the bark. She was reminded of one of her temper-prone ganders that had tried to attack a carthorse, only to get kicked by a rather large hoof.

Ani stopped and pressed her forehead on a branch in a kind of apology. The pressure of the tree on her face soothed her. She closed her eyes and thought she could hear a kind of breathing echoing all around her, from leafless branches and the thick trunk and below her feet. She opened her eyes and saw Tatto staring.

“You’re angry,” he said.

“I think so,” she said with some satisfaction.

“I saw my ma do that once”—he pointed at the tree trunk—“but to a milk pail. Kicked and chased it clear across the yard, crushed it to a ball of metal. Really.”

“Yes, well . . . ” Ani looked off to where some geese paddled on the pond, though the water was near freezing. *I cannot love you as a man loves a woman*. Her heart twisted at that. *And not coming back*, she thought. *Put him away, with the others who will not come back. Aunt, father, Selia, brothers, sisters, Talone, the guards, Falada. Put Falada away.*

“Tatto, do you know where they sent the princess’s horse?”

“Yes, the knacker two over east from your pens.”

Ani thanked him, and when Tatto had left, she told the geese to stay put. She found the knacker’s yard first by smell. The place reeked of discarded parts of animals—an odor sour and mean that lodged in her throat. Bits of coarse hair and feathers tossed around on a ground breeze and lay on the dirt thick as dust on a floor unused. A man in a heavy apron was sharpening his ax on a whetstone, even as she had imagined he would be.

“Sir,” she said, “the white horse, the royal one, has he been killed?”

He looked up from his ax.

“Aye.” He stepped forward. Clumps of animal hair stuck to his boots and to the dark stains on his apron.

“Yes,” she said. “I thought so. Yesterday.”

“A friend of yours, was he?” said the knacker, expecting her to laugh.

Ani winced. “Yes, actually. A good friend. But I’ve spent two months mourning and can’t cry anymore.”

“What are you, a misplaced stable-hand?”

“Goose girl,” she said.

The knacker nodded and pumped the pedal of the whetstone.

“Sir, a favor,” she said.

“Favor,” he mumbled, and kept it spinning.

She removed the gold ring, the one Gilsa had refused, and held it out to him, letting the afternoon sunlight flicker on its edge like a halfhearted star.

“For payment, for a proper burial.”

He looked up again and let the wheel spin down. Ani crossed the yard, conscious of the animal hair under her boots, and put it in his hand. His fingers were the dirty brown of unwashed blood. Ani swallowed at the touch. It could be Falada’s blood.

“He was a noble beast and shouldn’t die to be dog’s meat. Give him the honorable rites due the mount of a princess.”

The knacker stared at the circle of gold and shrugged. “All right.” He gave the wheel another pump. “Do you want to see him?” The hand with

the ring motioned to his right, and Ani noticed for the first time the hind leg of a white horse, the white hair stained all colors of brown from blood and dirt. It lay on the ground, severed from his body, being readied for dog meat. She took a step forward, her hand to her mouth. She saw the tip of another leg, the rest hidden by the hut.

"No," she said, "I've seen enough. I have to go." She turned her back and ran.



Four mornings later, Ani and Conrad herded their flock to the pasture, anxious to let them graze while the weather held clear and kept the winter rains and snows in abeyance. Ani liked to hurry into the sunshine of the pasture, not idling longer than needed in the shaded street.

That day, she stopped. Her eyes were drawn to the curve of wall above the arch. There, fastened to the stones, his neck attached to a round, polished board of dark wood, was the head of Falada. Ani grabbed at the stones in the wall to keep herself standing.

His mane was washed and combed straight down his disembodied neck. He was scrubbed clean of the blood of death and the mark of the ax. His head was imposing, bright white, nose pointed forward, like the proud carriage of a horse at a run. His eyes were glass balls, black as new moons.

"Look at him," said Conrad. He did not seem surprised.

"Why would they do that? Hang him there as they do the criminals?" She could not look away from the cold, glass eyes.

"Some favorite animal of a rich man, no wonder, though I don't know why he's hung by the goose pasture gate. You've never seen inside one of those fancy estates? Full of stuffed animals, dead pets, big deer heads."

Ani could not leave the spot. Conrad and the geese were far down by the pond, and still she stood. *Cruel, cruel*, she thought. *This is a proper burial? These are honorable rites?* She was angry and torn and heartsick and blamed herself and everyone in the world.

Falada, she said.

For a moment, the head seemed to agitate, like heat haze shimmering on a road. The dead face did not turn toward her. The dead eyes did not look. In that place in her mind where she had often heard his voice, she thought she felt a word spoken, soft as a spider's footstep. She could not understand.

Falada, look what they've done to you.
The eyes stared blindly; the stiff nose pointed forward.

Chapter 14

Winter came at last. The cold formed rain like knives that tore at the skin. Snow had topped the mountains in the west for weeks, white harbingers of the coming months, and then the first ashy flakes fell into the city streets. The geese stayed in their pens. The workers shoveled snow out of the west streets. When the snow stopped falling but stayed stubbornly on the fields, the workers stayed in the hall.

The winter Forest did not permit easy travel to visit their families. The restless ones wandered the city without coats, loitering outside taverns because they were not permitted inside, overhearing news to bring back at supper. There was talk of the wintermoon festival and the preparations for the royal wedding come spring. Tatto supped with them occasionally, full of palace news that they listened to eagerly, if with a healthy amount of incredulity.

"My da's company of soldiers doubled since harvestmoon. They don't train as much in the winter, but they're all in the city. There's going to be war."

Razo snorted. "Even if his company's bigger, that doesn't mean there'll be war."

"War in spring, that's what I've heard."

Worse was Mistress Ideca's news, some days after the first snow fell.

"This afternoon in came two of those strange warriors, what arrived with the yellow girl. They said they were looking for another yellow girl, one of their own that got lost in the coming." Ideca scowled at the thought, as though too many yellow girls could ruin anyone's day. "That's right, a second yellow girl, and said she'd have the hair and the accent and all. 'Course, I sent them on their way, said we don't keep foreigners around here."

"There's a dolt for you," said Razo. "Why'd one of the princess's girls be here? Try two places: the palace or the graveyard. That's what I say."

Razo looked to Ani for support.

"Two yellow girls," said Ani, "who would've thought?" She felt giddy suddenly, happy with her secret and her disguise. Ungolad had seen her at

the palace, but she would not be going back. They had killed Falada. They could not do worse. She felt strangely free.

There was no reason now to stay in Bayern. Falada was gone. Geric was gone. Every month she collected her thin gold steed, and come spring thaw, she would have saved enough to buy supplies and her way into a company of traders going to Kildenree.

She was not looking forward to spring. Her mother and Calib would doubtless welcome her home, and it would be nice to see her sisters again, but Ani had nothing real to return to in Kildenree. Still, Ungolad was searching, and if she stayed in Bayern, he would find her sooner or later. Besides, Ani knew that the families of the slain guards needed to know of their fates, and the murders and treachery of Selia and her followers should not go unpunished. Knowing it was right did not make the decision easier. She looked around at the workers and realized she would miss them terribly.

So in the meantime, Ani meant to enjoy being the goose girl. When the others were making plans for wintermoon, Ani took part, as eager to go with them as they were eager to show off the activities to a newcomer.

"Are you sure you should?" said Enna behind a silencing hand. "Won't the guards be there, and they're looking for you now."

"I can't hide forever," said Ani. "Besides, I'm not who they're looking for. I'm Isi, the goose girl, and I'm going to wintermoon."

It was as though marketday had exploded. The festivities began in market-square and flooded outward, consuming street after street in their color and tumult. Doorways and windows burst with giant paper flowers, and colorful ropes were thrown from window to window and building to building. On top of every turret blazed a paper sun dripping ribbon rays. People wore their best clothes, dazzling with strings of glass diamonds. Improvised bands of flute, harp, and lyre played in the streets. Children lit noisy bucket bombs and strings of purple star-mirrors. Magicians drew designs in the air with the weaving pattern of their balls. Drummers sat at the feet of sorcerers, giving rhythm to the pulling of apples from their boots and the turning of pigeons into bursts of flame.

"You'll see," said Bettin, one of the sheep girls, "even Forest folk are welcome everywhere at wintermoon."

Razo walked ahead, pulling on Ani's sleeve. "Come, Isi, we'll show you the witches."

Ani had never before seen a sorcerer or heard a drum, and she lingered, mesmerized by the strokes of his hands and the beating of the drum that insisted itself into her heart's rhythm. *Is it magic?* she wondered. *Or tricks?* She watched the sorcerer transform a walnut inside his clenched fist into a scarf. She looked to the faces of the crowd around her and saw that they laughed where she had been in awe and grinned to see the rat become smoke and the child spit a coin from his mouth. *I tell strange stories,* she thought, *and they marvel, but to them a sorcerer is nothing unexpected.*

Then she saw one spectator with a face that looked as incredulous as she felt. His pale blue eyes were unblinking, afraid to miss any movement of the sorcerer's hand. He turned slightly, and Ani flinched, lowered her head, and walked away. Yulan. Standing not two persons from her side. The drum beat a faster tempo, mimicking her heart. She walked at that pace for two streets before daring to turn around, face the throng, and try to pick out his face. Yulan was not there.

Ani found her companions near the witches, dozens of women in nearly identical garb—headscarves and long skirts and heavy loop earrings—sitting on the ground and on crates at the mouth of the square. Customers knelt before them and paid a copper for the witch to shake a glass bottle of black seed oil and tell the future or prick their palms with sharpened bird bones to divine their ailments. They then prescribed which herbs to take to heal the ailments and supplied those herbs for immediate sale.

Ani asked if it was magic.

"I guess, more or less," said Razo. "Enna, get your future told."

"Not a chance," said Enna. "I've got two coppers to spare, and I want an almond cake."

"Do it, Isi," said Razo. "Don't you want to know the future?"

Ani shook her head. "Can't spare the coin. I'll just have to wait and see it for myself."

Razo stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned in to eavesdrop on a stranger's telling. Ani pulled Enna aside.

"I saw one of them," she said, "a guard named Yulan. I don't think he saw me, but keep an eye out."

Bettin and the other boys tugged on Razo's sleeves, and they continued to walk through the festival. If Enna and Ani glanced around more than before, the boys did not seem to notice.

“There’re the javelin dancers,” said Conrad. A circle a few paces wide had been dug three steps deep into the ground. The crowd around it was cheering and stomping their feet in unison.

“Let’s see who’s dancing,” said Razo.

“Just see you don’t try to claim kinship with those boys again, Razo,” said Enna. “You’re as Forest-born as any of us.”

Enna led the way with her arm through Ani’s. She pointed at the circle. “‘Thumbprint of the Gods’ is what they call this. It’s supposed to be sacred, though I don’t think anyone remembers why. I heard the kings used to be crowned here. Now they do it privately with nobles only and where they won’t get velvet slippers dirty.” Enna grinned, then remembered what Ani was. “I didn’t mean to say all royals are like that. That’s just how they are here, or at least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

Ani smiled and lightly knocked Enna with her shoulder.

“Do you think we should go?” said Enna. “Aren’t you worried?”

Ani shrugged and stood on tiptoe to see in better. Razo shoved them from behind, and the group crammed into the crowd. The inner circle of watchers was holding javelins pointed inward, making a deadly ring of spikes. A boy of fifteen, naked but for a cloth around his hips and a strap covering his eyes, danced wildly in a space of not more than two paces. He had two shallow wounds on his back that bled freely. A drummer sat on the ground at the feet of a javelin holder, and the crowd stomped to his beat. Ani found she wanted to join the rhythm and forced her feet stay still.

“It’s supposedly a mark of honor if a boy survives the dance untouched,” said Enna.

“And if they don’t? Can they be denied the javelin and shield?”

“Just if they die, but that’s happened.”

The dancer finished and was followed by another boy who also was bit by a javelin tip, and then another who blindly flung himself on a point and cried out, stopping his dance. “Keep going, Wescelo,” shouted an older man from the crowd. The boy’s face was lined with pain. He tipped his head back and kept dancing.

Ani pushed her way out of the crowd, and the others followed.

“That’s awful,” said Ani.

“Not so bad,” said Razo. “If they can’t stand the dance, they won’t stand a war, and then why should they be given a javelin and shield?”

“I’d do it,” said Conrad.

“So would I,” said Razo. “If it earned me a javelin, I’d do it right now.”

“Oh, look,” said Enna. “It’s the royals.”

Ani saw a grouping of palace guards in their red-tipped yellow tunics and polished javelins. In their middle she caught a glimpse of several well-dressed, well-groomed, self-satisfied nobles. The feathers in their hats bobbed as they walked, and the lace-trimmed parasols of the ladies swayed delicately.

“They hardly ever come out in public,” said Bettin. “I’ve never seen any of them. Must be because the new princess wanted to see the festival.”

“Why don’t they come out?” asked Ani.

“They’re so high and mighty, is all,” said Conrad.

“My ma said that in the Eastern War the king lost all his brothers and his father,” said Razo, “and then he became king and there hasn’t been a war since. She thinks he’s being protective or something.”

“The prince’ll be there,” said Bettin. “Isi, don’t you want to see the prince?”

“The prince,” said Ani. “Yes, I do, very much.”

Enna nudged her. “You’ve never seen him?”

“Oh, don’t be so high-ish, Enna,” said Razo. “Neither’ve you.”

Ani outpaced Razo to where the crowd thickened. Others had the same notion, and an ever tightening ring of onlookers hemmed in the royal party. Razo put his hands on two of his friends’ shoulders and hopped up and down.

“No way through,” he said. “But they’ve stopped to game.”

He led them out of the mass and around behind the game booth. They crouched behind a wagon and peered between the backs of guards. In a moment a young boy in lavender velvet walked into their view and tossed miniature spears at a wooden boar.

“Watch it,” said Enna, pushing back against Razo, “or we could get a spear in the eye.”

“Which one’s the king’s son?” said Ani.

“The boy there in the purple,” said Razo. “Tatto pointed him out once.”

Ani laughed. “Truly? That’s him?” He could not have been more than thirteen. His face was round and still softened with baby fat, and he grinned with boyish delight whenever one of his thrown spears hit the wooden boar.

Enna leaned to her ear and said, “Narrow escape.”

“Indeed.” Ani felt a surprising thrill of gratitude to Selia for having saved her from that marriage. With a low laugh, she thought of how delicious Selia’s surprise must have been when she met her juvenile groom. Of course, Ani had no doubt that Selia would wed for the title but keep her Ungolad ever close.

Then another man stepped into view. Black hair, smooth as boot polish, tied back at his neck, his hat angled to his face, hands that Ani knew were broad and strong and, when they had touched her, had seemed to go through her skin and touch her blood. He walked beside the prince, his dark eyes scanning the crowd.

“Oh,” Ani said softly.

The prince handed a bundle of spears to Geric and patted his arm encouragingly. Several nobles laughed at a jest Ani could not hear. Geric nodded, smiling, and stepped up to the booth. The first and second struck home in the boar’s neck with a rigid thud. Some of the royal party applauded politely.

Then Selia slipped from the prince’s far side and approached Geric from behind, talking with a coy smile. When his arm cocked to hurl the spear, she bumped his elbow and the spear went awry. Selia had a merry laugh. Ani could hear it lift over the noise of the crowd. Ani’s fists tightened, and she hated Selia anew for teasing a poor guard in front of the nobles. He had been doing so well.

“There’s the princess,” said Enna.

Enna’s voice sounded like a warning, and Ani started to back away, before Selia saw her. But Geric was looking toward his lost spear. It had fallen not far from where Ani crouched, and when he looked up, he saw her. *Isi*, he mouthed silently. She could not move. His gaze held her. Selia stood at his elbow, jeering and laughing, any moment sure to turn, to see what it was he saw. Yet all Ani could do was stare.

“Isi, that’s the princess.” Enna tugged on her sleeve.

She blinked under Geric’s gaze, lowered her eyes, and moved away. They weaved their way out of the crowd and stretched to be back in open space.

“Why can’t we stay and see the prince?” said Razo. Enna glared at him and kept walking away.

Geric had not seemed surprised to see her, or pleased. He had seemed sorry. Sorry to see her or sorry not to? She closed her eyes briefly and remembered that biting line from his letter—*I cannot love you as a man*

loves a woman. And Selia had spoken with him in a familiar way. Ani shuddered to think how close she had come to telling him all. She had been wrong to think she could trust him.

"That yellow girl, she's not so pretty," said Razo. "I think our goose girl's prettier than the princess." Razo extended his arm with a flourish, took Ani's hand, and rested it lightly on his. "My goose lady." He was only kidding, but the attention felt good to her just then, and she placed her hand atop his.

"My sheep lord," she said.

They stopped to buy dark wheat cakes with cherry preserves. Ani, who was saving her coins for a long trip, ate the cracker bread she had brought from the hall. One of the sheep boys paid a street artist to paint an ink tattoo on his arm, a design of the Bayern sun surrounded by black blobs intended to be running sheep. The boy, proudly, asked the group if he did not look like a mercenary or a member of a rogue hundred-band.

"Guaranteed to last two months," said the artist.

"It'll wash off in your first bath," said Enna, shaking her head.

"Right, so it'll last him about two months." Razo grinned and got socked in the arm.

The group was giddy, singing catches of Forest songs and hopping to any sorcerer's drums. Razo spun Ani around in an improvised dance, and she leaned her head back and laughed. But when she ceased spinning, her middle felt heavy again and her feet were cold. She looked back often to the game booths. A tangled mass of people separated them.

They headed toward the main avenue, where the mounted procession would pass. Conrad was intent on witnessing the costumed group of men who wore horse heads and rode horses that were dressed as men. They passed the mouth of the square and the scattered group of witches perched on their crates like wise old lizards in the sun. Ani caught the eye of one woman with stained hands and purple lips. She dropped out of her group and went to her.

"I met you," said Ani, "at an autumn marketday."

The woman nodded.

"You said I had something new in me, that I didn't know it."

She nodded again, her piled hair bobbing precariously with the movement. "It's festival. You want to know things, you give a coin."

"I can't spare it," said Ani.

The woman shrugged. “You’ll figure it for yourself, then.” She considered Ani a moment, as though she were a chicken she might purchase, and then dug through her mouse-eaten bag and pulled out a drying scrap of thornroot. Pointing to her eyebrows, she said, “Time again.”

Ani wove her way among the crates, overhearing bits of purchased witch wisdom. “You’ll find love in the out-towns.” “You’ll find love in the city.” “You’ll find gold coins buried under the cowshed.” Ani pressed the thornroot with a thumbnail, wondering if there was any living juice left. Nothing dripped from the break, but her nail gleamed with a light sheen of brown. She bumped into somebody and, mumbling an apology, looked up to see where she was going.

Yulan. He stood before her, grinning, his fist resting on his hip. Ishta was beside him. Both held long, unsheathed knives.

Ani turned to run. With an easy yank, Yulan had her arm and pulled her close to him, her back pressed against his chest. Ishta stepped in, closing the circle.

“Hello, little princess,” said Yulan. He pushed the long edge of his knife against her back. “Give me a coin, I will tell your future.”

“Traitor,” she said. Her voice responded to his accent with her natural own.

She could feel his chest shake with a chuckle. He held her wrists in his sweaty grip behind her back.

“Ishta, the bad little bird has come neatly back to her master. I nearly didn’t recognize her with all her fair hair hidden. Clever little thing.”

Ishta nodded. He was watching the movements around them, his body stiff and ready for action.

“Did you kill them all?” she said.

“All,” said Yulan.

“Traitor!”

He laughed harder.

“If you ever return to Kildenree,” Ani said with desperation, “my mother will hang you, as they do here, with your cold, dirty body on a wall for all to spit at and for dogs to gnaw on your toes and for birds to pluck out your hair for their nests.”

“You have a lot more bite in you than I remember, though you still yap like a magpie.” He put his face against her neck and breathed deeply. “And

you smell like a magpie's nest. What, no one here offers to bathe you and drench you in scented oils? Perhaps Selia will let me do it, later."

She tried to push his face away with a knock of her head. He chuckled again, pleased with the struggle. Ani looked around her at the hundreds of people who stood near and passed them by, none glancing their way, none stopping to help.

"Later," said Ishta. "Take her to Ungolad."

Ani could not help wincing at the name, and Yulan noticed.

"You like to talk about what your mother would do, your pretty little mother who is half a year away? Let us think about our papa Ungolad, who is only up the road. Hmm, what will he do?"

Yulan pushed her forward, and the knife's edge against her back encouraged her on. She wrapped a leg around a horse post, and Ishta kicked it free. She began to scream and was answered by Ishta's hard fist in her belly. She could not make enough breath to scream again. After a block of struggled walking, she pulled breath enough to whisper.

"It is useless," she said. "They will know. You can't keep it a secret. Visitors will come from home. They will see the impostor. You will all be hanged."

"Oh, my darling girl, you're going to give yourself a wasting disease with all this worry. Selia is a smart girl, remember? She has it all worked out. What you really should be worrying about is Ungolad."

Yulan took no care as they marched up the street, and some faces held questioning looks as to why these foreign guards laid hands on one of their laborer girls, but they passed on.

"Enna," Ani whispered. She could not shout.

Her friend stood on the corner, searching the crowd. Ani looked at her, willing her to turn her head. The girl scanned past Ani. Before she met her gaze, Enna disappeared behind the gathering crowd.

"Enna," she said again, begging all the breath from her bruised ribs. She was not loud enough.

"Hush up," said Ishta. He knocked her side with an elbow, and she doubled over, standing only by Yulan's support. They stopped.

"Keep on with that, Ishta, and you will be carrying her."

To the side, a few dozen pigeons mused over a dropped loaf of bread. Their gray heads faced down, and they cooed nervously—*Hurry, eat for winter, fill your belly with bread, hurry, hurry.*

Ani knew she would have to be loud and quick. Yulan was urging her forward again. She took several fast, deep breaths, begged memory to serve her, and called to the pigeons. *From the building, cats! Cats! Fly away! Cats!*

A rainstorm of sound erupted as the flock took to the air toward the street, their wings beating hard, ungainly flaps, louder than a crowd. The people looked up as the frenzied birds landed among them. Ani struggled anew, hoping that Enna had turned and seen, hoping to give her time. The blade pressed her back.

The street rose abruptly, and her boots slid on a wet cobblestone and out from under her.

"Walk, or I will carry you on my knife," said Yulan.

"Almost there," said Ishta.

Ani pushed her heels down between two cobblestones and resisted until her leg muscles trembled.

"Move," said Yulan. The blade felt sharper.

"Drag me. Carry me. Make a scene. I will not walk like a hooded turkey to the chopping block." Ani felt her strength enlarge as she spoke, her limbs encouraged, her will determined. Again she had the fleeting thought, the memory of an image, that there was something else she could do. A whisper too quiet to hear beyond its breath. The pain in her back flared, and it left her mind.

"Ishta, pick up her feet."

"Make her walk," said Ishta.

"She is not going to, so get her on already."

Ishta's face was close to hers. His eyes were a pale blue. Their look felt like winter.

"Walk," Ishta said.

"No."

He held one of her hands close to his mouth. "I will bite off a finger."

He opened his lips one finger width. His mouth stank of onions and mold, and his teeth were dimly brown. Her hand shook in his grasp. She closed her eyes and waited for the raw consciousness of his sinking teeth.

"You there, yellow fellows."

Ani opened her eyes to a large man in the simple dyed tunic and trousers of a laborer. With him stood a second man of the same class, and moments later two others jogged up to join their group. All carried smooth, well-worn

quarterstaves. They wore plainly made patches of yellow suns stitched to their shirtfronts. Not soldiers, unless homemade soldiers. But their faces were grim and serious, and the staffs looked comfortable in their hands. Behind them stood Enna. They were the most beautiful group of people Ani had ever seen.

"Unhand the girl," said the man.

"Peace-keepers," Yulan muttered. He straightened himself, tightening his grip on Ani's wrist. Ishta lowered her other hand from his mouth and held it casually. His touch made her shudder.

"Nothing wrong here," said Yulan. "Ease down those staffs, boys, you have been misinformed. We are friends." They did not react. "She is one of us that lost her way and committed some unruly deeds in your city that we are here to mend. We appreciate your generosity in volunteering to patrol these crowds, but no doubt your services are needed elsewhere. This girl here is under our control."

The man listened calmly to Yulan, then looked to Ani and waited for her to speak.

In her truest Bayern accent, she said, "They've a knife to my back."

The four men acted instantly. In a moment she was loosed from Yulan's and Ishta's hands and placed in the center of the peace-keepers.

"You have no right," said Yulan. His face was red, and he sheathed his dagger with an angry thrust. "This is royal business. We have fair claim here." He drew from his chest an official-looking parchment with the yellow, blue, and red Bayern symbol blazoned at the top.

"She's bleeding, Aldric," said one of the peace-keepers.

Ani pressed her hand to where she could still feel the biting sensation of the dagger and brought it back marked by blood. There was a stir among the men. Ani thought they had communicated an anger among themselves that she could feel pulsating around her, hot as walking out of summer shade.

"Since when," said one, "do Kildenrean yellow boys have the right to cut Bayern women?"

Yulan shook his document in the air. Aldric, the lead peace-keeper, knocked Yulan's hand with the tip of his staff, and the paper fell to the ground.

"Fortunately," said Aldric, "we're not royal guards. They do less to protect our women than a garbage cat. And we don't buy for tin your fine order. We're out here to keep the peace. Keep it or get knocked."

“You’re done here,” said another to Ani, and he touched her shoulder with a finger.

“Thank you,” said Ani. She knew they heard her, but they kept their eyes on the foreigners.

Enna took Ani’s hand and they ran across the street. Ani stopped to look back just to see Yulan, trembling from rage, free his long dagger and jump at Aldric. His blade never reached flesh, and his head met the quick end of a practiced quarterstaff—a deathblow. When Yulan crumpled to the ground, Ishta had already fled.

That night at the hall, the workers were hushed and eager, listening with chins in hands and bodies leaning forward. The goose girl had been seized by men at the festival and dragged up the street toward what unknown doom. The goose girl had refused to be forced, and Enna had brought help and freed her. Enna told her story, and Ani spoke as much of her version as she could, leaving out the pigeons and the reasons. They called for the story again. She gave it while holding a wet pack of herbs to the shallow cut in her back—Ideca’s orders, to help speed the healing.

“No telling where that scoundrel’s nasty blade had been,” said Ideca. She clucked over Ani’s blue dress, mending the slash with tight, quick stitches and cursing yellow foreigners with pleasant enthusiasm. Her mood came so close to cheery that the workers nearest her watched her as though she were an unpredictable animal.

“It’s Enna who called the peace-keepers,” said Ani.

They patted Enna’s back and tossed her an extra raisin bun, but it was Ani who received a kind of awed regard for the story. A person who had been worth abducting, and been bruised and scarred, but struggled and was saved. They spoke the title of goose girl with a trace of respect.

Chapter 15

Winter days were short, spent cleaning goose pens, hauling grains, changing water, and clearing the streets of snow on days when the sky let loose its winter passion before settling into placid frigidity. Evenings, Ani roasted nuts, cheese, or pigskin by the hall fire and learned to play sticks and tell-your-neighbor. *This feels like a family*, Ani thought. The cold outside and the warm inside. The usual food on the table, the same jests repeated, and conversation as familiar as looking down at her own hands.

When Ani beat Razo at sticks for the first time, all the watchers cheered, Ani raised her hands and cheered, too, and laughed so freely that her loneliness broke and fell away as though she had never felt it.

Ani told them stories at night, of mother's blood turning children into warriors and mother's love keeping babies tight in lockets, and when she told the stories she no longer visualized her own mother, but thought of Gilsa and the mothers of the workers, and the stories gained new truth and strength.

Then, when the mood quieted into watching the flames repeat themselves along the hearth log and into singing Forest songs that made everyone wistful and hushed, Ani wandered to the window. She saw herself caught in the mirror that the candle and firelight made of the pane. She bent closer and saw the depth behind the pane, that when she shielded the indoor light with her hands and pressed her forehead against the icy glass, the world outside melted from black shadow to blue stone. Night blue cobblestones and stone houses and the high stone wall. The dark blue sky smooth as a river stone. Something was moving there.

She had begun to feel it more profoundly since winter came. The cold deadened the world—froze stones, emptied streets, buried the pasture, and iced the stream. The bare trees stood against the whiteness like rigid ink strokes reaching upward to the dimmed, gray paper sky. In all that stillness there was space to feel that something else moved, something that had eluded her in the busyness of summer and autumn. It was out there, across the stream, or deep beneath her feet, or in her chest. She could not give it a name.

One evening the feeling haunted her. She stood by the window in the hall, listening, sure that if she concentrated harder, she could understand. It was the same feeling that had told her she could do something more when she fled from Ungolad at the palace, and again when Yulan's knife drove her up the street. She wrapped her neck with a borrowed scarf and left the hall.

Ani walked quickly. There was a breeze, and it nipped at her ears and bit at the exposed skin of her wrists and face as though trying to get in. The sudden cold dulled her, and she no longer felt the pulling, but she knew where she was going.

Falada's head was a lighter shape against the dark wall. The moon was low, but its light rarely reached that sinking corner of the city. Ani looked up.

Falada, she said.

She thought of the first time she had heard that name, bleated from the small mouth of a wet, gangly, beautiful colt. He had been born with his own name on his tongue.

Falada, she said.

She remembered her aunt saying Ani had been born with the first word of a language on her own tongue and did not open her eyes for three days with the effort of trying to taste it. Her aunt had sung her a song of waiting so that she would open her eyes and be patient until the day she could learn that new tongue. Remembering that promise awoke anew the desire to discover it at last.

Falada, she said.

She remembered the last word Falada had spoken to her, in the forest, when she had lost the handkerchief and turned her back to the river. *Princess*, he had said. He had always called her Princess. She missed him sorely and strained to hear him again, not with her ears, but with that part of her inside where his voice had always come, and from where she had been able to respond.

Falada, she said.

And because she was straining, she heard the brush of that final word again.

Princess.

The resonance of Falada's voice came softly, an echo of what was once spoken, like the voice of the sea from a shell. They faced each other thus in

silent conversation, the shivering once princess and the mounted head of her steed, dead speaking with dead.

A breeze wound up her skirt, touched her cheek, and chilled her where tears had left wetness. Ani wiped her cheeks and reached for a second time with her mind to hear herself named, yearning for the comfort of Falada's voice.

Falada, she said.

Princess.

Ani started. She had been expecting to hear that word, but this time the tone did not carry the distant echo of Falada. A new voice.

She struggled to hear once more.

The winter breeze still brushed against her cheek, and again she heard her name—*Princess*—and what had laid on her tongue since the morning of her birth now loosened.

Ani pulled her scarf tighter and shivered. *It is true after all. Even the wind has a language.*

The voice of the wind entered that same place inside her where she had always heard Falada's, though its tones were unlike. It was an icy finger of thought, a rush of words that expected no response, as indifferent to her as to a tree. It was beautiful. There in the cold, blue shadow of winter night, Ani cried for Falada, and for the beauty of the language of the wind, and for the reminder of who she was.

Princess. Ani felt the wind and heard it identify her again. Then it lifted from her skin and slipped through the gate and out into the open pasture.



Ani returned every day. Conrad thought she visited that spot to check if the snow ever lifted enough from the pasture to allow grazing for the geese. But she stood before that portal and never noticed the winter world that lay on the other side. She looked up, spoke her horse's name, and strained to hear the response.

Falada.

Princess.

And when a breeze touched her skin, in place of the memory of Falada's last word, she heard the wind call her Princess.

She longed to talk to Falada in truth, to tell him that she had been lost in the Forest and that she had not meant to leave him. That she had tried. She wanted to say that the guards had seen her, chased her across the palace grounds and once at a festival, but she had begged help from strangers and birds and from a friend, and been freed. Ani smiled to herself, remembering that Falada in life would not have concerned himself much about any of the doings of people. But he would have listened. And he would have flicked her with his tail and nibbled on her hair to cheer her up.

She wanted to tell him how his last word resonated from the dead, and when all living things were dimmed by winter, she was able to hear it, and hearing it again taught her how to hear the wind.

She wanted to ask him if horses understood the wind.

His glass eyes looked at nothing. His mane was stiff, glued by the knacker to sit perfectly smooth in wind or stillness. She knew he was gone, that what she heard was only an echo. But that echo had reminded her how to listen deeper than her bones, to listen for what no one else heard. And as the days passed, and she learned how to listen, when the wind touched her skin she began to hear much more than just her name.



It was a few weeks after wintermoon, and the days were beginning to stretch themselves out like a cat that is tired of sleeping. The sun burned holes into the frost and ice in a brief abeyance from winter, and for a few days the patches of gray winter grass livened into green. Conrad and Ani took advantage of the window of warmth and herded the geese into the pasture for the afternoon. The geese shook their feathers in the sun and ran from the arch to the pasture, waddling dangerously in their haste and honking that though winter was not over yet, at least there were green things to eat again. Ani turned to Conrad to laugh, but his expression muted her.

Conrad had been in a foul mood of late. One winter night he had told other workers, in mocking tones, how Ani believed she could speak to the geese. But instead of laughing at her, Enna and the other chicken-keepers began to ask her advice, and soon even Razo pleaded help with a naughty magpie who pestered his prize ram. Ani noticed now that whenever one of

the keepers came to her with a question, Conrad sat back and watched her darkly.

"Don't mind Conrad," Enna had said. "Back home, he's the youngest of seven kids. I suspect the geese're all he's ever had of his own and he's jealous of you. He's just a boy, and fifteen, and needs to grow up. Give him time."

After the geese passed under the arch, Ani stopped and looked up. She spoke Falada's name and received her own, and the wind that came up off the stream touched her. *Stream*, it spoke. *Cold, ice, geese moving toward stream. Stones. Princess.* She was filled with the haunting, wonderful mystery of its language, and she stood enthralled, sensing the words it spoke.

"The wind. I can hear, but I can't speak."

"What?" Conrad was watching her, his lips tucked out in a cautious frown.

Ani looked away self-consciously. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Who then? The horse head?"

She shrugged and passed through the gate. Conrad followed without a word. It was not unusual for Conrad to spend a day in silence, but that day he did not visit his friends in near pastures or wander into the wood. He was always nearby, watching. When the afternoon clouded over, he stood and began to herd the geese, then stopped.

"Why do I bother? They respond to you and your little noises like you're their mother. You might as well gather your own little goslings."

He took his staff and strode off toward the city.

Conrad continued to be sullen. On the days when sufficient sun broke through the winter sky to be out of doors, Conrad always sat close enough to the beech tree to stay in Ani's view. Though she longed to listen to the wind and try to speak back, his stare stopped her.

"She's not normal," Ani heard Conrad say to Razo as she passed by his open door on the way to the hall. "She stands under that horse head like he's looking at her, and it's not that she's so good with the geese, but she actually thinks she's talking to them. Someone like that shouldn't be allowed to keep the king's geese."

"Ah, sit on it, Conrad," said Razo. "Everyone thinks you're green because she's a better goose-keeper than you."

"I am not." He sounded like a little boy on the brink of a tantrum.

The next morning dawned icy. Ani had taken her turn at the bathhouse the night before, and she woke shivering, her hair still wet on her pillow. She stayed in her room all morning, trying to comb out the coldness. When near-noon arrived with enough sun to take out the geese, Ani stuffed her damp locks into her hat and met Conrad.

She stood near her tree most of the day, walking in circles to warm her blood, listening to the wind as it spoke through the beech branches of cold that was still to come before the world brightened into spring.

Ani marveled at the words that she began to hear so clearly now. It was nothing like learning bird speech, listening to the sounds, watching the movements, and practicing again and again to get it just right. Not like horse speech, that came slowly and easily as the colt grew, words like a voice in her mind, clear as her own thoughts. The wind blew understanding. It spoke in images, repeating where it had been with each new touch. It required concentration to hear it and to untangle the images into meanings.

A breeze lifted up to the beech from the woods beyond the stream, rustling of evergreens, owls, and deer and a private spot not too distant where sunlight streaked through the trees. Ani shivered, threw a glance at Conrad, who sat on a stone glumly watching the clouds, and told the geese to stay by the pond. She hoped they would obey.

Ani hopped across a narrow waist of the stream and found the little space, a small room of warmth inside a birch copse. She sat on a rock, took off her hat, and let her hair fall loose. She scratched her head with a pleased scowl, closed her eyes, and let the sun soak up the dampness and cold, willing winter to drain out of her bones.

An errant breeze sneaked through the trees and touched her bare neck, whispering of what it had seen—a fox, a pine, a secret spring. Ani considered the breeze by her ear, then thought of her hair long and damp at her back and, with a sentiment, suggested it take that path.

Ani opened her eyes, her muscles tight in surprise and wonder. The breeze moved between her neck and her hair, wrapping itself around her locks like ivy on an oak and passing among the hairs delicately, lifting them one by one, blowing on a strand like a careful maid dusting. Ani felt the wetness loosened and taken into the air. She sat very still, afraid to think or move and lose the wonder. Somehow, she had spoken to the wind.

“Yellow girl.”

She stood and whirled around. Conrad was standing between the trees. His eyes were on her hair. With a start, she put a hand to her head and felt the hairs still tossed on the breeze, though the air around her was still.

"What are you?" he said.

Ani hurriedly wrapped her dried hair around her head and secured it with her hat. She spoke silently to the breeze that still plucked at her hat ribbon, suggesting a new course for it to wander. It snaked down her arm and left the copse.

"The goose girl," she said.

Conrad laughed. "You don't come from here. You aren't natural."

"Conrad, don't say anything to anyone about my hair. If you understood __"

"It's not fair. They think you're the queen of geese or something and I'm just a dumb boy who couldn't do it by himself. But you're not even one of us."

He ran back to the pasture.

That night, a light snow fell. The mood in the hall was gloomy as the workers contemplated potatoes like warmed rocks, skimmed milk, and wrinkled, winter apples dry as cork. No cheese, no sugar for sweet breads, and no winter-moon to look forward to. The wind shook the windowpanes. Spring seemed as far away as the ocean.

The workers began to talk of home, exchanging stories of the hopelessness of pulling a livelihood out of the evergreens and ferns and spongy soil. There had been news of sick siblings last marketday. There were widowed mothers and widower fathers and donkeys too old to keep pulling a cart to market.

"My wages are a last chance," said Razo, his head bowed as he contemplated the fleabites on his arm. "Of course, they have been now for three years."

Some chuckled, nodding their heads.

"I make more chasing sheep," said one boy, "than my da pulls in all year."

"I think the marketgoers buy my ma's weed hats out of pity."

"I know about that. You've seen our family's rugs."

Bettin pulled chicken feathers from Enna's hair. "One winter harder than this one, and they'll have to leave the house and come to the city."

All grew quiet at that. Images of the city passed as a collective thought, houses shoved in any corner, stories piled on top of wobbly stories, the whole place stinking and sweltering in the summer, children playing in the streets, splashing in downhill trickles of dirty water. Ani shuddered. The city was as beautiful as a birthday cake from afar. It was not so friendly when one was out of luck. She glanced out the window toward her little room. It had never felt like a home, but it felt safer than any place she had known.

Maybe after I return to Kildenree and all is set to right, she thought, *I'll come back here again and be queen after all*. She had no desire to wed the boy prince she had seen at wintermoon, but as queen she could do something to better the ugliness she had seen in the city. *And perhaps*, she thought wryly, *by the time I come back he might've grown up some.*

"Isi, what does your family sell?" said a girl next to Ani. Her clothes emanated clover and clean animal.

"I don't know what they're doing now," said Ani.

Conrad leaned back, put his boots on the table with two thuds, and laughed roughly.

"You don't know what they're doing now," he said. "Very good."

The attention spun to him. Ani held her breath.

"You know, Conrad," said Razo, knocking Conrad's feet off the table, "lately you've come close to being a genuine imbecile."

"What? She's fooled you all? Your beloved goose girl's not from the Forest. She's not from here at all." His voice drove higher, mocking. "Oh, you've such milky skin. Your eyes're almost green. What's wrong with my duck, goose girl? What's the matter with this pig? Go ask the stuffed horse when it's going to rain next."

"Conrad," said Ani, "this isn't going to help. Please."

He looked around as though wishing that someone would come to his side. "I can't believe no one else sees it. She's not one of us. She's been playing us all along. I've seen her out there combing her hair down to her knees like a precious little queen. She's the one those guards're looking for."

He stood up, and Ani started back.

"She's a yellow girl," he said.

The workers were silent, staring at her, the room tense as a saddled stallion.

“Isi,” said someone.

Ani thought, *I’d best do something or they’ll hang me on a wall like Falada.* She stood up.

“What you’re saying isn’t right. I’m sorry I’ve come here and made you think I’ve taken what was yours, but you don’t have to make everyone hate me for them to like you.”

“Yeah, so shut it, Conrad,” said Enna.

Ani winced. “Enna means that you should let this go, all right? None of us wants to choose sides in this hall.”

Conrad ignored her. “You don’t know, Enna. I’ve seen her. . . .”

“So’ve I,” said Enna. “So just drop your ugly jealousies and eat your cold potato before I cram it in your gullet.”

Conrad’s face burned red, and he slammed his fist on the table. Razo and Beier stepped up beside him and gently held his arms. Conrad flinched but kept his eyes on Ani.

“Then tell me, Enna, why she’s always hiding. Always with a hat or scarf. Why doesn’t she just take off that scarf now and prove it?”

“Yes, Enna, you know me. Tell them.” Ani looked at Enna and waited for her to speak. It felt good to take this risk and to trust another person again. But when Enna looked up, her eyes were sad and mouth drawn. *Oh no*, thought Ani, panic twisting her stomach, *I was wrong to trust her. She’s going to betray me.*

“Come on, then, Enna,” said Razo, “what’ve you got to say? Why not let Isi just take off her scarf and prove it so we can get Conrad to bed? I think it’s plain that the city’s getting into his head this winter.”

“You sops.” Enna sighed painfully, and her gaze could barely be raised to Ani’s, as though weighted by shame. “I’m sorry, Isi, but I think they should know.” She sighed again. “Isi’s hair got burned off in a fire just before she came here. She’s embarrassed, poor duck. And I’m not going to let her take off her hat just to put Conrad straight.”

Ani widened her eyes and looked down, masking an unexpected desire to laugh. Enna put a protective hand on her shoulder, and the workers began to avert their eyes and poke at their cold potatoes with sudden interest.

Conrad stood still a moment, wavering between action and anger. “I’ll prove it,” he said. No one responded. He stomped out of the hall.

Ani touched Enna’s hand on her shoulder.

“How many times’ll you save me?” she whispered.

“If you were a better liar, I wouldn’t have to,” said Enna.

“I know, I know, I’ll have to work on it. But I knew you’d be good enough for both of us.” Her smile tightened. “He saw me with my hair down, Enna.”

“No one’ll believe him. Who’s he going to tell? Let’s just keep you safe until we can get you on your way come spring. Until then, I’m glad you’ll let me be your guard goose.”



It was sunny the next day, and the next, and Ani herded the geese to the pasture. Conrad followed from a ways behind and shouted mock encouragement.

“Nicely done, goose girl.”

“Keep them together, there.”

“Watch that gander, goose girl, that he doesn’t bite your precious rump.”

She wandered the pasture, checking for the occasional egg the geese would lay by the pond or hidden in the arc of river birch roots. Of a sudden he stood before her. She held her staff in front of her.

“You’ve got to leave me alone,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t tell the truth to the others. I can’t. I wish I could.”

“Give me a strand of your hair.” He stepped toward her, his hands outstretched.

“Don’t touch me,” she said.

A bit of wind slipped off her hat ribbon and grazed against his chin. She saw goose bumps rise on his neck.

“Leave me be, and I promise before long you won’t have to see me anymore.”

He shook his head but backed away.

The next afternoon, Ani looked up from reading one of Geric’s books to find herself alone. Conrad was nowhere in sight. She felt calmness settle into her like rain dropped from the beech. *At last*, she thought, *he’s tired of watching me and gone away.* The geese, happily paired and foraging for fresh plants, ignored her presence. A spot of sun broke through the sky and cast shadows of the branches on the ground around her, a map of forking roads.

She took off her hat and scratched her scalp and neck. She rarely uncovered her hair, even when no person was near enough to see, but she felt restlessly safe, and tired of bindings, and ready to make things happen. A breeze rapped on her forehead, and Ani encouraged it to go down, lift up the tips of her hair off the ground, and tickle them in the air.

She had not communicated with the wind in many days, conscious always of Conrad's gaze. The exercise delighted her. Tendrils of wind rose up her arms like candle smoke in still air, sought out the roots of her hair, and wound through them. She practiced sending the wind this way and that, noting that it did not always respond. Sometimes it was already set on one course and would not change. Sometimes it was too thin and slow to do more than loosen into still air, or so strong that it barely touched her skin before pushing itself away. Unlike a bird or horse, the wind was passionless; not thoughtful or playful, but often persuadable.

The shadow of the tree darkened. She saw the shadow of a hand reach toward her wind-lifted hair. Ani grouped the wind that touched her into one thought and begged it to fly away, behind her, toward the lunging shadow. She felt it leave her skin.

She turned to see Conrad chase his orange cap away from the tree. The breeze tossed the cap farther, always ahead, always a little faster. Ani watched him run and braided her wind-combed hair into a tight hoop on top of her head like a crown of gold. By the time Conrad caught his cap off the upper branches of the far pasture hedge and strode back again, Ani had replaced her hat with the ribbon firmly tied and was reading again. She could not keep her smile down.

"You're a demon, girl," he said.

"Goose girl," she said.

After that day, Conrad would not stand so near that she could put out her arm and touch him. When the workers in the hall made clear that they did not care to listen to his grumbling, he sat alone, holding sticks in the fire until they smoked and turned black.

Ani placed her raisin bun beside him. Conrad took it and ate it with a kind of acknowledged defeat, but when he glanced up, she saw that his boyish face was still disturbed by lines of anger.

Chapter 16

Two months from wintermoon dawned brightly, and the workers, sequestered for over a week by icy rain and winds, left their rooms and stretched in the sunlight, glad for one morning to be taking their animals out to the fields again. The geese were as anxious as Ani to leave shelter and get soil beneath their feet, and they squawked cheerfully all the way.

She stopped in the shadowy corner of the wall and greeted Falada. His mane was still damp, though his hide fared well in the wild weather. His glass eyes looked indifferently at the stones of the city.

Falada, she said.

Princess.

Conrad was still disregarding her presence. Occasionally he dropped his despondency enough to tease the geese, chasing them for tail feathers or honking nonsensically. He stayed by the wall that morning, leaning against the gateway and combing his ragged, self-cut hair with his fingers.

Ani sat under the beech and listened to the wind. It sought out trees, running around their trunks and weaving through their branches, the way a cat arches under a hand, seeking a good scratch. When it touched her skin, she could feel the rumbling, wispy voice that let images of its wanderings whisper out into sound. Not speaking to her, but just speaking, its existence alone a language.

A spider's web, sang the wind, *the stream, the stream, the tattered cattails of autumn, the slender birch trunks, the wood. Men in the wood. Five men in the wood. Coming toward the stream, toward the geese and the beech and the princess.*

Ani stood up, pulling on a cool, gray branch to support her weight. Five men in the wood. No image of horses came on the wind, so they could not be nobles coming back from a predawn ride. Five was too many to be workers away from their keeps. She strained her sight toward the dark copses and light spots across the stream, looking for movement. A wild pheasant beat its wings, an agonizing sound against the tense silence. Nothing else.

Then she spotted figures, dark, crouched, moving from one shadow to the next. They stopped.

“Conrad,” she said, afraid to shout. He did not look up from his musings by the pasture archway. “Conrad.” She did not know if he could hear her or if he ignored her.

She looked back, and the figures were moving again, nearing the line of birches that bordered the stream banks. Again, they stopped. She saw a glint of metal winking like an ominous star.

Danger, Ani told the geese. *Danger by the stream.*

She used the word for “bear,” a beast of size and fear, not “dog” or “cat,” which the ganders would be tempted to turn and face. As one, the birds scurried away from the stream, making a group like a pond of milk in the middle of the pasture. Conrad looked to the noise of forty-eight geese honking and flapping their wings in ado. His eyes lifted to the stream, and when he saw, he turned into the arch and disappeared.

Ani ran to the head of the flock and placed herself between her charges and the approaching men. They wore leather of different makes and different animals, mismatched vests, jerkins, caps, and leggings, and leather-sheathed knives. Three bore poles tipped with wire loops, perfect for hooking goosenecks, and two dragged large, empty sacks. There was no temper in their miens. They met Ani’s eyes and did not slow their advance.

“These geese aren’t for you,” said Ani.

One grunted. They were nearer.

“These’re the king’s geese. I won’t let you take them.”

One acknowledged her. “Move aside, goose girl, or we’ll have to knock you aside.”

Ani stood firm and held her crook with both hands. She felt as ridiculous as a gander facing a bear, but she did not move. She had decided that she would not run. The geese squawked behind her.

The first man reached her. He slammed his pole down on her and cracked her staff in two with a sound like near thunder. Her knees folded, and she fell to the ground.

Run, she told the geese.

They did not run. The ganders had circled the geese and made terrific noises of defense, their heads lowered and menacing. The men paid no mind. With their long poles they snared the birds by the necks and pulled them in like fish on a line, bagging them without a bite. Ani watched. Her face was pressed to the ground. One of the thieves stood above her and held the end of his staff to her throat. She swallowed against the pressure that

made her dizzy and stomach sick. There was a creeper breeze nosing around the ground. It crawled over her arm and bare hands.

Up there, she urged, *that man, his hat, something.*

The breeze spiraled up to the man, probing his head with its brisk fingers, and slipped the cap off his head with a brief gust. The hat fell to the ground. The thief glanced down, unconcerned. The geese were honking anger and fear as nearly a fourth of their number was stuffed into the bags.

Ani concentrated on all the air that stirred on her skin, willing it to come together. Passing breezes joined, curious, wrapped together like crude wool folding into a ball. *More*, Ani pleaded. The breezes built up to a wind, flowing over her and on the grass in an ardent circle, building, like a finger-spun whirlpool in still water, like a beast pacing before attack.

"Let me go," said Ani. Her voice barely escaped the force on her throat. "These are the king's geese. They're protected."

The man did not glance at his prisoner, but he frowned slightly.

The circle of wind felt restless now, *swoosh*ing around her head, picking at the tiny hairs on her face and hands, waiting for an idea to lead it. She gave it a suggestion to move away a little and tear into the ground. It followed. Still making contact with her outstretched hand, the mob of wind swirled and bit at the ground, pulling loose dirt and pebbles into its body until it looked to be a short, dark creature spinning on itself. The thief heard gusting and turned his eyes, then his head, then his whole self, unbelieving and unexpectedly afraid.

"Libert, Odlef, look, will you," he said.

The men turned their backs on the geese and saw dirt-filled wind grown as tall and wide as the beech at its back.

"A trick," said one. "A sorcerer's shabby trick."

"A trick," said another. His face betrayed honest dread.

Ani's thought pushed the wind from the ground to hit the first man in the face. His eyes filled with dirt, his cheeks were pelted with small rocks, stinging like bees. He dropped his pole and threw his arms around his head.

The wind continued forward and reached the other four, rushing at their eyes, swarming around them, pushing them together as though they were the prey caught in a sack. The geese exploded into an attack, biting the thieves' ankles and calves below the isolated windstorm. The men, blinded by dust, confused the wind and the geese until it all seemed one monster, screaming in their ears, shoving them with stinging hands and biting their

legs. More birds escaped from the forsaken sacks and attacked. The men, swatting at nothing like old women afraid of wasps, fled the pasture at a run. By the time they reached the stream, they had outpaced the geese and the wind had lost its ammunition and dispersed into wisps, but they still ran.

Ani sat up slowly, watching until the wood shadows swallowed sight of their retreat. Her skin tingled. Three poles and two inert sacks lay on the ground like battle corpses. The geese ran in circles and toward the stream, some posted on the near shore barking at the woods while others trumpeted victory. She rubbed her sore neck but honked happily with her geese.

The sound of running boots jerked her to her feet. Conrad raced through the arch, followed by three of the boys who worked in the field to the north. They halted when they saw Ani standing alone, dozens of angry geese running around and dozens shouting at the stream. They glanced at the broken crook that lay at her feet.

"Where are they?" said Conrad. He saw the goose-nabbing poles and bags, and relief crossed his face at the evidence that he had not fetched the other boys for nothing.

"Gone." Ani laughed deep in her chest, wondering how she might explain.

"Your staff," said the boy named Sifrid. He picked up the two pieces and held them as testimony to the others. "You were attacked."

"Yes," she said. They waited, and she cleared her throat. "I defended myself, and then the geese chased them away."

All four boys stared at her, their mouths slightly open.

"How, how many were there?" said one.

"Five," she said.

"Uh-huh."

One of the boys grinned. "The goose girl drove off the thieves. How about that?"

Another laughed good-naturedly and gripped his shepherd's crook. "I thought I'd have to fight when Conrad came running with tales of leather-donned men prowling in the wood. Thanks for saving me a sweat." He punched her lightly on the arm.

"You're hurt," said Sifrid, pointing at her throat.

"I'm all right." She could feel her heart beating on the spot where the thief's pole had held her to the ground.

“We’d best get back in case the thieves decide to swallow their first defeat and try another keeper’s flock.”

“If they attack, we’ll come get you.”

“Yes, we’ll yell, ‘Help, help us, goose girl, and bring the Terrifying Legion of Warrior-Geese.’”

“How about the Bandits of a Thousand Feathers?”

The three jogged away, giddy, jawing over the event and planning to stop briefly at the hall to recount the story to Mistress Ideca.

“Thanks for getting help, Conrad,” said Ani. “I thought at first that you’d left me alone.”

“I’m no coward,” said Conrad.

“Of course not, that’s not what I meant.” Ani shook her head in frustration. She could understand the wind and speak with birds, but humans still eluded her. That was her mother’s gift, after all. And Selia’s.

“I would’ve faced them,” said Conrad.

Ani nodded earnestly, hoping to convey her good faith in him. He shrugged, leaned against the archway, and inspected his boots for holes. The geese were still squawking. Ani gathered them in with words of safety and calm.

When the clouds blotted out the blue of the sky and the air shivered with an early spring chill, Ani took the geese in. As she opened the door to the hall, a cheer erupted and fists banged on the tables. Sifrid held up the pieces of her broken staff as a symbol of the battle. Mistress Ideca examined her neck and prescribed a cool pack. Though Ideca did not smile, she did not grumble, either. Ani declined to relate what had happened, so the cow and sheep boys stepped forward to relay their version, embellishing the parts they had not seen.

“And then the goose girl knocked two down with her staff, a careful blow to the head, and the second head. Bam, crack. The third was a giant man grown in the Bavara Mountains on bear meat and raw eggs, and he crushed her staff with his fist.”

The listeners responded with feigned and jovial gasps of horror. Ani laughed behind her hands. When she looked up again, she saw Conrad in a far corner. His face was serious and sad.

“So the goose girl,” said Sifrid, “she tossed aside the broken weapon, and grabbed her opponent by his greasy hair and hit him with her own head right between the eyes. Bam. Down he fell, dumb as a dead tree, and shook

the ground. With a word, she commanded her goose army to drive the scum from their land, and they followed their leader, trumpeting triumphantly."

There was laughter and applause, and four lads were sent to the pasture to retrieve the villains' poles and bags for more mementos. Two did not return until much later and entered the hall not with poles, but with Tatto the pageboy.

"The king's heard of the strife for the protection of his geese," said Tatto, "and he wishes to hear the story and thank those involved."

The workers cheered. Ani stayed seated. Her face felt cold.

"I, I can't go," she said.

"Oh, come on, Isi," said Sifrid, "go brag a little."

"No, no, really I can't."

Razo stomped his foot. "You're not so shy as you let us think when you first got here. You can face a king. He's just a man in a crown who eats potatoes and has gas."

"I bet he doesn't eat cold potatoes," said Bettin.

"Well, maybe not *cold* potatoes," said Razo, "but I'd bet my fist he's as gassy as Beier."

"Nobody's as gassy as Beier," said Sifrid, dodging Beier's shove.

"Guess Isi'll have to find out for herself when she goes to see the king, won't you?" said Razo.

Ani could see the workers were not going to let her sneak out of this. She spotted Conrad in the corner, pretending indifference to the commotion, and she went to him.

"Will you come?" she said.

He shrugged and stood up.

They followed Tatto out of the hall, encouraged from behind by the cheers of the workers. When they had walked a block, Ani stopped.

"I'm not going," said Ani. "I can't go. I was hoping, Conrad, that you'd go in my stead."

Tatto looked at her wide-eyed, but Conrad did not respond.

"Please," she said. "You were involved, and you would've fought them off yourself, but that you were being wise. Don't even mention me. The story's yours. Tell it how you will."

Tatto shook his head. "Aren't you the one what drove them off?"

"They don't know that. What does it matter? Besides, Conrad deserves some credit. I can't go to the palace. I just can't."

In only two months she would have enough money and the weather would be right for a journey back to Kildenree. At this point, she knew it would be wise just to stay out of sight. Conrad shrugged and walked away with long, growing-boy strides, Tatto running after him. Ani watched their departing figures wane, two boys in a large city, and wondered if she erred in not joining them.

In her fancy she imagined being lauded before the court, and Geric admiring her bravery and looking at her as he used to, and the king insisting on knowing her history and believing her when she told it, banishing Selia and the others far away and welcoming Ani home. *That's how it would end*, she thought, *if it were a bed-tale.* But she knew it was useless to hope for such an outcome. If ever she was to walk into that palace without fearing for her life, she must first take the long road back to Kildenree and plead the aid of her mother.

If, after all that, the betrothal still stood, Ani realized she would not be sorry to return to Bayern. She did not look forward to the dim-looking boy prince as a husband and a forced marriage possibly devoid of affection, but being Bayern's queen had its appeal, and besides, the city was truly beginning to feel like home.



Ani lay on her bed and read the end of the Bayern history by the evening light. She closed the book and put her cheek against it. There was still an odor of a library on it, of dust, leather, binding glue, and old paper, one book carrying the smell of hundreds. She opened the front cover and found Geric's name scratched into the first page with too watery ink, the signature of a small boy. She smiled to herself to imagine Geric at eight, with the round face of youth and impatient curiosity. She ran her fingers over the mark of his name.

Enna rapped on her door and entered. Ani shut the book guiltily.

"I thought you'd be in here. The boys've returned." She examined Ani's face. "What's the matter? You're upset?"

"Huh? Oh, no. Well, I guess, a little. I was just lovesick, a bit."

"Ah."

"But I'm recovered." She put the book down emphatically. "He's not mine, never was. Well, for a spell he brought me picnics and books to pass

time, and once flowers, though they lost their petals in the rain. He even offered to give me a horse, a very nice one, really, and mistook me for a lady."

"You are a lady," said Enna.

"But that's beside the point, because I wasn't then, am not now, but he still saw me that way, as though he saw me, and not the goose girl boots, and not a princess crown. He was—he's beautiful, enough to make me sigh like a lovesick nurse-mary. He's a guard, to the prince himself, actually, and much too close to Selia for my own liking, and besides, he doesn't love me, so there it is."

Ani shrugged her shoulders with resignation and gave a quick nod as though dismissing the subject. Enna tried to smile at her, but her dark eyebrows were pinched together.

"Enna, you're worried."

Enna nodded. "I think that you should come hear what Tatto's telling the others."

When they entered the hall, Tatto was seated grandly on the end of a table, and the attention of the workers was unusually and unquestioningly his.

". . . and it's all set for spring, once the pass snows melt. It's as sure as a copper's copper, says my da."

"If it's true, peacock, why would they tell you?" said Beier.

Tatto sniffed. "Common knowledge. Rumor can't get there before the war, anyhow."

"War?" said Ani.

"With Kildenree," said Enna.

"What do you mean, Tatto? Why would Bayern attack Kildenree?"

"It's the other way 'round," said Conrad. He was looking at her shrewdly. She glanced away.

"Exactly." Tatto nodded. "Word's out they mean to attack us, have been planning it for years. But we've got the mountain pass road just about finished, and we'll be there before they can get us. I guess that princess, the yellow girl, was a decoy, sent to marry the prince to pretend all's well. But she went against those rough yellows and told the king about the war because she likes Bayern and doesn't like how evil her people are, or something like that."

“The princess,” said Ani. “The news that Kildenree’s attacking Bayern came from the princess. And the king believes her?”

Razo shrugged. “I heard some rumors this winter about Kildenree and their plans.”

“This’s her plan,” Ani whispered to Enna, gripping her shoulders urgently. “This’s her way of sealing her secret.”

“Don’t worry, Isi,” said Tatto. “Da says our army’ll crush them like a grape between fingers.”

“Yes, he’s right,” said Ani. “They will.”

“I say about time,” said one of the sheep boys. “We haven’t had a good war since my da was a boy.”

“Not that we’ll see any of it,” said Sifrid.

“Maybe,” said Razo, “if it’s big enough, maybe they’ll need the Forest boys, and we’ll all be given javelins and shields and join the king’s army and come home warrior champions to crowds of swooning city girls.”

Many laughed, though there was hope in the laugh. Someone started a war song, and most of the boys and some girls joined in. “The valley quakes, the long road calls—the javelins march, the young men march, the new bloods march where kings command. The mountain shakes, the mighty falls—and warriors march, the brave men march, the bloodied march with sword in hand.”

Ani watched them, and every word of the song felt like the blow of a hammer. The hall shook with their voices. Then suddenly the singers stopped, leaving the silence heavy with images of Forest boys as men and warriors. The fire in the hearth popped and flamed.

That night, Ani could not sleep, could not even lie down. She paced in her tiny room, a new plan taking uneasy form. She had told Enna once, “Even if some of the workers were willing to go to battle on this, I don’t think it would be right to endanger their lives just to get back my name.” But now there was war. This was no longer her battle, not just a spat between two former friends or bad blood among countrymen. Now Selia was pulling all Bayern into her viciousness. The massacre in the Forest had not been one separate, brutal act—it was the first brawl in Selia’s personal war for power. And Ani was the only person with the knowledge to stop it.

Tomorrow, she would tell the workers the truth and beg them for their aid. With a guard of friends, she had a chance of making it to the king alive, and there she would have to tell her tale. The thought of exposing herself

like that was frightening. She had no evidence, just her yellow hair and her story. But Selia had a story, too, and false witnesses, and behind it all the convincing power of people-speaking.

The squeezing in her stomach would not allow her to sleep that night. She walked off restlessness by striding to the goose pens. Jok and his mate nestled near the gate, and he raised his head when she entered.

Ani greeted him and sat for a moment, wondering at the beauty of white birds in the dark. Jok nuzzled his mate sleepily, and the goose prodded his feathers with her beak.

I am alone, Ani said to Jok. *Come rest the night in my room.*

The two birds followed her, silent but for tiny, distinct flaps on the cobblestones. The walk was not far, and soon the pair nested in a disarrangement of her blanket, their stout bodies filling most of the space. Ani sat beside them awhile, a hand on the warmth of their feathers. Then she paced again. There was no room for her in the bed, and she did not care. She mumbled to herself—war, Selia, wind, the king, and war.

Her cheeks were hot from worry and movement, and she sat below her window, her back to the street, and let the crack under the door move air over her hand and up to her face.

She awoke perhaps an hour later. She was lying on the hard cobblestones of her floor, her cheek resting on her outstretched arm and her loose hair over her face. There was another noise coming from outside. The first noise had awakened her. She held perfectly still and listened.

The creak of a boot sole. A small stone freed from its mortar by a careless foot. A hushed, heavy breath. Ani, moving only her eyes, glanced up to her little table where sat the mirror Enna had given her at wintermoon. Its face tilted toward the window, toward the slit in her curtains where they never fully closed. Stooped outside was a form, one eye peering in, a bit of cheek, part of a long, pale braid.

The door opened slowly, the noise as slight as the breath of a sleeping bird. Ani did not move. Nothing seemed clear, as though she were still sleeping and seeing the strange images in a fragmented dream. The door opened wide, separating the corner where she lay from the intruder. Ani rose slowly to her feet. The rustling of her skirt was masked by his step. *His step*, she thought. *His. Ungolad*.

As the name entered her mind, fear jolted through her frame and woke her blood and widened her eyes. She could see his back now and the glint

on the tip of his bare dagger. He crept toward the bed where two geese slept, indistinct pale shapes in the dark blanket. A too small draft curled around her ankle. No way out. The window was sealed. She would have to slip out the door.

Ani took a step. And another. Another. She held her skirt in her right hand, softly, to keep it from touching the door. Her toe crossed the soft line of moonlight that fell through the doorway. He was at the bed. His hand touched the blanket. Ani took another step and entered the light of night.

The two geese squawked when roused by a stranger's hand. Ani started and then ran. She heard Ungolad curse and the trumpeting calls of the geese —*attack, enemy, danger, bite, beat, protect!* Her boots pounded against the stones, and the impact beat her joints and shook her vision. The horrible thuds of boots on rock echoed behind her. She thought she heard doors opening to the right, and still, farther behind now, the honking of geese. For months she had been practicing fleeing from Ungolad in her nightmares. Now she could think of nothing but how to run.

She ran a path she knew, the easy road, past the settlements, not up to the pens but down, the street leaning toward the city wall. The west gate. Thud, thud, thud came the running behind her, always the sounds getting closer together, always the sounds getting closer. She could hear his breathing now, hard in his throat. Her muscles were trembling. She waited to feel his hand grasp her neck or spring for her legs and pull her down, a fox on a hen. The west gate rose before her, the empty socket of stone that spilled into the pasture, the wood, the Forest. Above its eye, the white blue semblance of Falada, guardian of the gateway. Ani looked up. The footsteps behind missed a beat. He leapt for her, to catch her before the city ended. A touch.

Falada, she said.

Something happened. Like lightning at her back. Like a beast tearing out her side. Like a touch of heat exploded into flame. She cried out, and her voice sounded animal in her throat, quiet and strange and frightful. It was pain. She put a word to it, and her feet stumbled.

His dagger had caught her back.

The footsteps behind her did not resume. She heard his body hit the ground with a grunt. He had leapt too far to meet her with his knife and must have fallen. *But*, she thought, *he will be there when I fall as well*. The thought was as inevitable as her stumbling feet.

Princess, said Falada.

Her feet found stones, and she kept running.

She ran from stone to grass, and the lower pitch of running startled her, and she thought he ran behind her still, so she ran still faster, down the pasture, propelled by the pain in her back as though it were her pursuer pushing her forward. She leapt over the stream and looked back to see his form racing down the hill.

There was a dry storm crackling in clouds darker than the sky. A stab of lightning briefly lit the face of the north horizon. The world seemed blacker at its departure. The pasture was restless with winds, tumbling over one another like bears at play, knocking against trees so hard that their leaves shook like knees. It swirled around her, a hundred different winds at once, pouncing on her shoulders, thumping against her back, hunching her shoulders against its force. And it stayed near, as though it sensed images of its own language like salt on her skin.

The dark figure was coming toward her. With every touch of air on her skin, with the sting in her back, with her mind that rolled over itself like the storm, she bade the wind strike. She felt the rush, and then stillness. The figure fell hard to the ground and turned over twice. He stayed down, arms over his head, crouched low as a stone, hiding from the wind that ripped at his clothes and hair. Ani turned to the woods and ran. She did not look back again.

The trees turned to wood and the wood to deeper wood, and she took no heed of where she ran, but away. To breathe was agonizing, yet she could not get enough air. She thought perhaps the running would go on the length of a forest, the length of a kingdom, the length of a world. When she came to the wall that closed in the royal woods and pastures, she climbed it without thought. It was low on her side and dropped two men's height on the far. She jumped down, hit the ground, and, stunned out of breath, lay painfully still.

The moaning noises of the woods. The buzz of a night bug's flight. An owl. No human sounds. If a guard patrolled the wall this far in the woods, he was not near. Ani told herself to stand before a guard returned, before Ungolad leaned over the wall, looked down on her, and smiled, predator at prey. A breeze that roamed the ground along the wall passed over her neck. She tried to calm her heart and clear the fear from her head enough to listen. There were no human images in its speech. She coaxed a wind to her from

down the wall and sought it for news of the woods she had left. No scent of Ungolad lingered. She must have outrun him somehow or, more likely, lost him in the wood. She lay still and listened to any breeze that came near, and their stories soothed her, and her heart slowed and her eyes drooped.

She made a last effort to stand and stumbled away from the wall and farther into the woods. Afraid to fall asleep bleeding into the earth, she stayed standing as she tore strips from the hem of her tunic with an effort that awakened the pain anew. By the time she had wrapped her middle with the strips, the ground and trees and sky were tilting and spinning so that every direction seemed to be down. She put a hand over her eyes and found a darkness dimmer than the night. Her body crumpled onto the hard earth.

Part Three



Yellow Lady

Chapter 17

Ani walked for three days. Daylight revealed that her back was stained with the dark brown of dried blood, and when she touched the cut with her fingers they came back a fresh red. She kept walking.

Clear thought seemed to have left her at the pasture archway where Falada last called her Princess and where Ungolad's knife had bit her. Her hair hung long and uncovered. The sight and feel of it made her uneasy, and she avoided any person who neared her path. She remembered that there was a safe place to go, and she struggled to get there, listening to the wind for the cool murmuring of water and a path away from people.

Four nights she spent on the ground. Except for the first night, when loss of blood and exhaustion closed her eyes for her, Ani was conscious enough to feel the cold of early spring nights. Even in the deepest part of sleep, that awareness of cold pursued her, bruising her dreams and waking her often with icicle fingers on her skin. Day was an extension of the nightmare. She walked, and fell, and walked. When certain plants and mushrooms that she recognized as food crossed her vision, she dropped her left hand and harvested them in passing. But she had little thought for food, and she only sought out word of water from roaming breezes when the thirst clenched her throat. Once she awoke with a start to find her face underwater, having stopped to drink in a stream and lost consciousness.

There were people in the Forest. She did not know if they were good or bad. She never strayed far from the great road that led to the city, keeping it almost in vision off to her left. Though when breezes brought images of humans, she was forced to march farther in.

High morning after her fourth night, Ani found the familiar little path that led off one of the many twisting Forest roads. She almost fainted from relief at the sight of the places where she had wandered in search of roots and berries so many months ago, and she thanked creation for memory and luck and the hints of winds that led her.

She was startled when she first saw the cottage again, worried that she was mistaken, for its aspect was wrong, before she understood that her vision was not trustworthy and she saw two houses of shifting images. Perhaps there had not been as many trees in the woods as she had seen.

Poppo the goat bleated at her, and Gilsa raised her head from her garden.

Ani meant to call a greeting but found her voice was as questionable as her sight. The thought of rest suddenly made her giddy with fatigue. She kept walking forward until the woman caught her by her arms and held her still.

“Yes, what, child?” said Gilsa. It seemed her voice was short not from impatience but worry.

“Gilsa, I’m going to faint again.”

And she did.



Ani awoke lying on her stomach on Gilsa’s low cot by the fire. It was blazing cheerfully, the crackling of the wood sap accompanied by the pleasant clicking of Gilsa’s knitting needles. The halfhearted light of evening peered through cracks in the shutters.

“I’ve slept all day,” said Ani.

The clicking ceased, and with a low grunt Gilsa slid her chair closer.

“You’ve slept all day, night, and day again. But your fever’s gone now and you’re in precious little danger.”

Ani winced, sure that was not completely true. Gilsa watched her, then shook her head as though dismissing sentiment.

“Heavens, child,” she said, “I appreciate your warning me of the faint this time, but you might have let me know you were injured and where before tumbling to the ground. It took me time to cut the clothes off you and more time to wash you clean and find the wound. A thoughtless way to ask for hospitality.”

“Oh,” said Ani, “that was the blue tunic that you gave me, and I’ve ruined it.”

Gilsa scowled. “Cry for a knife in your back, not an old blue tunic, gosling. You didn’t even rouse when I washed the stab clean and tied it up tight. Finn thought you were dead.”

Ani saw Finn across the room, sitting on his bed with his hands folded on his knees. He nodded once to her in greeting, then stood and brought her a large bowl of hot bean and onion stew. She ate ardently, and they watched her in silence.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I told Mother,” said Finn, “that somebodies—”

“Some persons,” said Gilsa.

“Some persons were trying to kill you, and might come this way. She couldn’t believe it.”

“Yes, well, I can now, but I don’t want to hear about it.” Gilsa stopped and stared at her stilled knitting for a moment. She put it away and huffed. “Though, on consideration, perhaps I’d better.”

Ani told them all, even of Falada’s head, and learning bird tongue and the wind, telling more than needed telling, the stories clarifying and unifying themselves in her mind as she let them spill out of her mouth. When she finished, she looked from the fire to Gilsa, who scarcely hid her amazement, and Finn, who stared blankly and then nodded to her encouragingly when he noticed her gaze.

“Well,” said Gilsa. “That’s a story you don’t hear on the eve of wintermoon, even if you do tell it with that neat little accent like you’d been grown here.”

“I used to tell stories to the other workers, sometimes on rainy days, sometimes on cold nights when the only sounds were the fire and the wind outside. Tales my aunt told me, stories I’d read in books. In these last months I’ve told more stories than I thought I knew. And I’ve told lies. To hide. Now, telling you the truth, it sounds to me like just another story.”

“I like that story,” said Finn.

“Hush up,” said Gilsa, “it’s not a story that asks for liking.”

“I’m not sure I like it yet,” said Ani. “Maybe it’s just strange to hear it aloud. I’ve never told it all to anyone, not even Enna, who knows some. Saying it makes me want to change it, make it sound pretty the way I do with the stories I tell the workers. I’d like it to have a beginning as grand as a ball and an ending in a whisper like a mother tucking in a child for sleep.”

Gilsa huffed. “You want it all to end with you riding home on a tall horse and everyone cheering or some such like the young daydream.”

Ani watched the firelight turn the hearthstones gold. “Maybe I did. Maybe I hoped I’d return home again and everyone would say, We were wrong about her. And they’d see that I’m special and beautiful and powerful and all that.”

“Oh, you all wish such stuff, you and Finn like you. Right now he’s probably daydreaming about getting a javelin and shield, as though such nonsense will make the chickens lay bigger eggs.”

Finn looked down at his boots, his face hidden by his hair.

"We know it's all just daydreaming. In all likelihood, no one in this forest'll ever get a javelin, and I'll never see my mother's kingdom again, let alone be hailed by crowds as the jewel of Kildenree. Maybe it's vain to wish for it. But sometimes, it'd be nice just to hold something real in your hands that felt like a measure of your worth. Right, Finn?"

Finn looked up through his hair, and she saw that he smiled.



Ani was forced to stay and heal in Gilsa's house. She troubled about every passing hour and looked to the weather, wondering if the pass snows were melting, if the army had moved yet, if the prince had yet wed his false bride. She told Gilsa, "I've got to get back soon, to tell the other workers and enlist their help and go march on the palace and demand an audience and convince the king—"

"Patience," said Gilsa, and escorted her from the window back to bed.

The cut was deep, and she had lost much blood and healing time moving through the woods. She lay on her belly day and night, fretting when she was not sleeping. After two days, Gilsa allowed her to rise awhile and follow her around the yard, though she was not to lift so much as a chicken's egg. When Ani shadowed Gilsa into the coop anyway, Gilsa slapped her hands away from the task and then asked her what the chickens were saying.

"'People are here to take the eggs' and so on. Chickens aren't the best conversationalists."

"I'm glad," said Gilsa. "Makes me feel better about eating them."

That afternoon they were visited by Gilsa's nearest neighbor, a round woman named Frigart who frequented the cottage in good weather. She sat by the hearth and complained of her husband and son while Gilsa, half listening, knitted caps. Ani, tired of lying down, was at the table, leaning forward to keep her wound from touching the chair back. The light slanted into the room from the window, and when Frigart's gesticulating hand passed through the light, it sparkled.

"That ring," said Ani. She stood and took her hand. It was a ruby in gold setting, as familiar to her as the face of its owner. Her face burned.

"Where'd you get this?"

Frigart pulled her hand away. “That’s none of your affair.”

“It was on a man who was murdered in these woods,” said Ani. “Did you take it from his body? Did you bury him?”

“No such thing.” Frigart spat with the words in agitation. “What a thing to say! It was given in payment.”

“What is it, Ani?” said Gilsa.

“This was my ring.” She remembered Talone that last night in the Forest, his fist at his heart swearing loyalty. “I gave it to a friend who was killed.”

“Well, you can’t have it back if it ever was yours,” said Frigart. “I don’t know how my lodger got ahold of it, but I fed him for two months before he could get out of bed to lift a finger and earn his board, so it’s rightfully mine. And I’m still helping him, I’ll have you know, letting him stay on and work with my husband. Says he needs to earn money to take a long journey.” She frowned, and her cheeks pushed up like a little child’s. “Besides, I’ve never had a pretty thing in all my life.”

Gilsa protested enough to do any mother proud, but Ani insisted, and when Frigart left, Ani accompanied her home. Finn accompanied Ani, his arm through hers. They walked nearly an hour at a pace slow enough not to tear open the cut again and easy enough that neither Frigart nor Ani lost her breath. Ani could feel her heart beating in her back from pain and in her throat from excitement as they rounded a bend and saw the cottage. A man was chopping wood in the yard. His hair had always been dark for a Kildenrean, though now it was speckled with more gray than she remembered and grew unchecked past his shoulders.

“Talone,” she said.

Talone looked up and dropped the ax. He ran forward and she tensed, afraid he would embrace her and her wound, but he stopped before her, took her hand, and fell to one knee.

“Princess,” he said. He cried over her hand, his back shaking with sobs.



Frigart, with new and awkward gestures of respect, invited “Princess” indoors, where she set them up in chairs around her hearth and, with regretful looks, left them to talk alone. Finn stayed, quiet on his stool by the window.

Ani insisted that Talone tell his tale first. It was short, and she suspected that he left out many of the details of hardship. All had been slain, nearly he as well. His hand touched his side, and Ani thought it must have been a deep and mortal wound that cut him down. Talone had fainted from blood loss and awoke to the sounds of midnight grave digging. He pulled himself away unobserved and wandered through the woods, finally finding Frigart's home, where from necessity he had remained ever since.

"I knew Ungolad and his friends would be in Bayern, so my plan was to return to the queen. I . . . took . . . some time to heal, and then the winter months trapped me, and having no money or horse hindered me more." He shook his head, and his eyes lined with anger. "I thought you, too, were slain. I thought the only chance of redemption would be to stay alive and find a way back to your mother or they might never have learned of the treachery. If I had known, Princess, I would have searched for you, in the Forest, in the city. You have been unprotected all this time. I have failed unpardonably."

"Not at all, Captain. We were betrayed and outnumbered. I, like you, decided that for the time there was no remedy but perseverance. And we've both survived."

Talone smiled at her. "Your mother would be proud if she saw you now. Though she might not recognize you with your hair hid and speaking in that smart accent."

Ani covered her lips with her hand, embarrassed that she now spoke in the Bayern fashion unawares. The movement of her arm pulled the skin of her side, and she dropped it again with a shudder. He gestured to her middle and inquired.

"Ungolad," she said.

He looked mournful, an expression she guessed he had worn for many months.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Please don't be," she said. "He was greedy and overconfident. If he'd grabbed me instead of hazarding a swipe of his dagger, I'd be much less alive."

Ani told her story to Talone, and this time it seemed more real, so much so that when she spoke of Falada's head on the wall, she had to pause with a hand over her mouth to stop a sob. Talone's eyes never left her face, his expression betraying grim wonderment. Finn leaned forward, his chin in his

hands. When she forgot the detail of Conrad's chasing his hat on the wind, Finn prompted her and chuckled at the relation.

"I suppose when Conrad was invited into the presence of the king to tell of the goose thieves, he also told of me or spoke to the guards, because they found me that night. He did. Ungolad. And I ran." Ani closed her eyes briefly at the memory, but the terror was starker in darkness. She looked back at Talone and smiled. "Dear Talone, can you even know what comfort it is to find you?"

Talone breathed deeply and broke his gaze from her face to the window. The shutters were closed, and no light broke through the slits. A breeze tapped the branch of a tree on the wood in a timid knock. He seemed to study the noise and the evening as a general would look over his battlefield.

"There is a war, then," he said. "Ungolad is a clever man."

"And Selia," said Ani. "I think she's been overlooked too often. I remember years ago my aunt saying that Selia had the gift of people-speaking. She's used that gift well."

Talone nodded distractedly. He did not seem interested in the dangers of Selia or the gifts of language, only in the war.

"How long until you can safely walk back to the city?" Talone asked.

"Now," said Ani.

Talone looked at Finn.

"Mother says in a week."

"Mother's boy," said Ani with play spite.

It was decided in four days they would return. And if she could not make it by then, "I'll carry you," said Talone, "though you're a mite bigger than you were when I found you sleeping by the swan pond."

Ani and Finn slept at Frigart's house that night and returned the next day, Ani leaning on both Finn and Talone as she walked. After the excursion, she slept for a day and a night, and Gilsa assured her that she had been warned.

Talone walked to Gilsa's house daily, dragging any fallen logs he found, which he chopped into fire-size blocks with Finn's ax. After that ritual chore, he sat with Ani by the hearth or on a stool in the garden, and they planned, or talked and talked over all that happened in that Forest and all they knew of their enemies. Both agreed that returning now to Kildenree was hopeless. The Forest Road would take them months.

"There is the mountain pass," said Talone. "With war parties gathering, it would be difficult to slip through it unseen, but it may be our best option."

Ani shook her head. “Even if we succeeded, all we could do is warn the queen to ready her armies. There’d still be war. No, I think our best hope’s to return to the city. I’ve friends there who might accompany us to act as witnesses against our murder, and with you supporting my testimony, we’ve more of a chance of convincing the king.”

The days passed too slowly for Ani. Everything around her spoke of action—the pale blossom buds on the apple tree about to unfold, the bent green necks that poked up in Gilsa’s garden ready to straighten and reveal their leafy heads, the birds that scavenged the ground for seeds and sang tunes about now, now, now. Whenever Gilsa discovered Ani pacing or leaning on the fence and looking through the trees as though looking ahead, she guided her to a chair or cot and made her sit.

“Rest while you can. Even a princess has skin that heals with time.”

Gilsa was hardly impressed to learn that her refugee was royalty. She tossed around titles with a playful spirit, never really believing them. She gave Ani a simple skirt and tunic dyed beech leaf green. The first time Ani put it on, she discovered that the four thin gold coins, her savings for a way home, had been rescued from the pocket of her blue skirt and slipped into the new one.

“They’re for you,” said Ani. They were as light on her palm as birch leaves.

“No such thing,” said Gilsa. Her tone held the tight self-awareness that a joke was imminent. “You can pay me back when you’re queen.”

The night before departure, Talone stayed at Gilsa’s. There was much debate over who should sleep in the shed. Gilsa thought the travelers needed bed rest more than she, Ani insisted that neither Gilsa nor Finn should be ousted from their own beds, Talone thought he and Finn would fare best in the shed, and Finn nodded to whatever plan was stated at the moment.

“Get back in my cot, girl,” said Gilsa. “You’re sickly.”

“No, I’m not,” said Ani.

“Oh, no? Well, maybe stubbornness is a sickness, did you ever think of that?”

In the end, they set up makeshift bedrolls on the floor before the hearth and slept side by side like little children sharing one bed.

They rose early and breakfasted slowly, holding too hot tea to warm their hands and staring at the morning fire. Finn was going with them, on his

insistence. Gilsa was thinking of last minute cautions for her son and occasionally reminding him that she would be alone and in ignorance until he sent word. Talone cleaned his sword thoughtfully, a gift from Frigart's husband when he learned the real value of the red ring. Ani watched their faces painted an early orange from the hearth light.

Ani was stilled by the remembrance of the first time she took her leave of that place six months previous and the girl she had been then. Smiling, she thought of her blunder, thoughtlessly taking Gilsa's own bed as though she were still a princess in a palace and pleased to be waited on. And of wandering into a foreign city with a feigned accent and the naive notion of simply finding the king and telling what had happened, a plan that was easily frightened out of her by the sight of Selia wearing her dress. She had run three times since then. She would not run again. All would be set to right, or let Ungolad's dagger find its mark.

Chapter 18

Gilsa gave them each the good-luck kiss of a widow, and they took to the path. The air was clear and smelled of new, growing things. Ani listened to the breezes and all their news of spring and chose to feel confident. The men would not let her shoulder a pack, so she walked easily, if more slowly than before.

They spent two nights under the Forest canopy before they reached the thinning trees of the near-city. There Ani and Talone waited while Finn, his mind full of careful descriptions, crept ahead to scout the gate and main way for any sign of Ungolad's men. He returned some time later convinced of safety. Ani felt the city winds confirm this, their image-speech vacant of pale-haired men, and they moved on.

It was not a marketday week, and the traffic through the gate was sparse. She felt exposed entering the gate past the giant stone posts, two great sentinels on either side gazing down at her with their stony suspicion. No one hindered their course.

The wide avenue was bedecked in celebration of the impending wedding. The trunks of the tall oaks that lined the avenue were wrapped in paper—yellow, blue, orange, and white, like thick-bodied women dressed for spring. Above them, long ribbons bridged the open sky, converting the oak tops into arches. The party walked long beneath them, the straight shadows enveloping them and dismissing them again and again, a repetition steady as the beating of a sorcerer's drum. In market-square, there were more papered ornaments than people. The entire city was quiet and brilliantly colored. Ani thought it eerie and sad, like a resplendent bird that had lost its song. Everything trembled with tension and expectancy.

Ani led them through narrow streets, avoiding main ways. They reached the west city wall and followed it a distance to the workers' settlements. The low buildings crouched against the wall like a street cat hunting in the shadow. The sun was still high in the west, and the sky was full blue; the workers would still be in the pastures and stalls, gleaning the last bits of sunlight, letting their charges recover from winter and relish the green, sprouting things that were erupting from the fields. Grass burst between the cobblestones under her feet. Spring was breaking, even in the city.

When they arrived at Ideca's yellow house, Talone insisted on entering first. He paused on the threshold and said, "Princess, the room is full."

Ani stepped up beside him and saw all the workers at the benches or on the stones by the hearth.

"Isi." Enna jumped from her seat and ran to the door. Ani motioned to Talone that it was all right, and he stepped aside, sheathing his sword. Others followed Enna's lead, and soon half the hall was embracing her and congratulating her on being alive. Some touched her with a reverence and uncertainty that made Ani turn to Enna with a quizzical look.

"I told them," said Enna. "I'm sorry. It seemed right at the time. I'm just so relieved that you escaped. I saw you running away that night, and I was so scared. Your geese woke half the settlement, and we went after you. I had to tell them why you were running and who was chasing. But you both disappeared into the woods, and Isi, you don't know how crazy we've been all these days with no idea what happened."

"The geese that were in my room that night . . ."

"They're fine," said Enna. "I think that braided man kicked the gander, but he's a hardy one."

"He is," said Ani.

"So, goose girl," said Razo, shouldering past others to stand by Enna, "you're really a princess?"

"The genuine yellow girl," she said.

He smiled at her and lightly punched her arm. The rest stayed back, watching her as though she were a strange bird with large, unpredictable wings.

She introduced Talone and Finn to the workers, and they all tried to introduce themselves back at once, shouting their names over one another. Ani cut through the commotion, asking why they were all in the hall when the weather was good.

"It's holiday week, for the prince's wedding," said Sifrid.

"When?" said Ani.

"Two days," said Ideca, speaking for the first time. She squinted at Ani. "You're that yellow girl after all? Then you'd best hurry, goose girl, because you've got until three tomorrows. Humph, imagine marrying a murderess. She'll cut his throat in their marriage bed."

"Or murder enough of Kildenree to cover up what she's done," said Enna.

“The army’s marched,” said Sifrid. “They left last week by the main gate. There was a celebration. The war’s not a secret anymore.”

Enna’s expression brightened with a thought. “After you left, we had Tatto slip messages under the king’s door. Anonymous. Saying that the princess was a fraud and so were the tales of Kildenrean war plans. I don’t know if they got to him, or if he believed them, but we tried.”

Those who had not heard of the letters to the king began to ask questions, and for a moment the hall blazed with talk. Ani looked around and saw Conrad seated in the corner, his hands in his hair. She crossed to him, loosed a strand of hair from under her scarf, and plucked it.

“Conrad, I’m sorry.” He shrugged, and she sat beside him. “You were right about who I was, and I lied because I was scared.”

She handed him the long, pale hair, and he took it and rubbed it between his fingers.

“I told those foreign guards where you were.” He looked up, and she saw that his chin was trembling. “I wanted them to find you. But I didn’t know they would try to kill you. I swear I didn’t know.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “That part’s over now.”

Conrad glanced down at the hair and came close to a smile. “I really wanted to yank one of these from your head, but you got witchy on me. And now you’re a princess. Who’d’ve thought?”

Ani stood and turned to the workers, who stood by in silence. “I don’t understand something. I lied to you all before. Why do you believe me now, when I say I’m the princess?”

Enna gave a frank smile. “Because we know you.”

Then everyone seemed to answer at once. “Yeah,” said Bettin, “you’re our goose girl.”

“You’re the yellow girl,” said Conrad, turning to grin at the boy next to him.

“You’re Isi,” said Razo.

Enna touched her sleeve. “You’re Ani.”

Ani smiled and looked down, her eyes wet.

“Yeah, what do we call you now?” said Razo.

Ani shrugged. “Whatever you want, Razo.”

Someone whispered, “Well, I’m not calling her Isi or Ani. She’s a princess now.”

Enna realized that they had been walking since dawn, and soon the three travelers sat to some warmed stew and nearly fresh bread. Ideca served them herself. Ani noticed that her bowl held more stew than usual. She was nervous, both to ask the workers for help and to face the Kildenreans again, but she bade her stomach be still and tried to eat quickly.

While they ate, several workers approached Finn. Some recognized him from marketweek, and they asked where he was from and what he sold. Finn answered their questions and surprised Ani by seeming pleased at the attention, particularly from Enna. He was more interested in what she had to say than in his food and did not flinch when she touched his shoulder in passing.

Before Ani had finished her bowl, she noticed that many of the workers were fetching crooks and staffs and putting on hats, while others patted their backs and spoke low things in their ears.

"What's going on?" said Ani.

"We're going with you, Isi, er, my lady." Razo pushed out his chest and held his staff in front of him with both hands. "We're your working guard, in the peace-keeper tradition, unpaid and unasked but ready with a quarterstaff, or a crook, at least."

Ani stood. "We came back here to beg your help, and before I even ask you're waiting for me at the door."

"Don't look so surprised," said Enna. "You should know by now that the Forest grows 'em loyal. Does a pine kick a bird out of its limbs or the moss off its bark?"

"Am I the moss on your bark, then?" said Ani.

Enna grabbed her around her waist and shook her affectionately. "You're the mossiest girl I know."

"Thank you, thank you for being willing. But before you come, I need you to know the danger. The group of Kildenreans and the false princess massacred over twenty of their countrymen. This isn't a game."

"Well, we're still going to play it," said Beier.

"Clearly we're going with you," said Enna. "What kind of Forest folk would we be?"

"But—" said Ani.

Enna held up her hands in defense. "Isi, I know you're worried someone'll get hurt and it'll be your fault. Don't. We know there's danger.

We may be Forest folk, but we're still Bayern, and we won't back down from a fight."

A few workers stomped their staffs on the floor, and someone shouted, "For Bayern!"

Ani laughed, stuttered, and finally said, "Thank you."

Talone nodded and stepped forward. "Good, then. Listen here." The attention turned to him, and some boys straightened up and stuck out their chests as though they were regular soldiers at attention. "The impostor's guards will want to slay us before we can enter the palace. Your duty is to guard the princess. Do not fight unless they attack you, and do not leave her side. Our goal is to reach the king. It is good that we are many. With just three of us, they might have tried to pull us aside and slit our throats before the king hears our story."

"The storytelling'll be my job," said Ani. "If the king doesn't believe me, you are to come back here, and don't make a scene. I'd like you to live through this."

Enna turned to her. "I'm not going to leave you alone. I said I wouldn't."

"I'm serious, Enna. If he doesn't believe me, it'll do no good."

"We'll see," she said.

Ani opened her mouth to argue, but Talone touched her elbow. "Princess," he said.

She nodded. "For those of you willing, it's time to go."

Ani led the procession. Going before the crook- and staff-bearing mob in her leaf green clothes and leaf green headscarf, she felt more the harbinger of spring than commander or princess. The small army of skinny beast-keepers in unpolished boots gripped their crooks and looked about with anxious pride. Talone carried his sword, his eyes the color of steel, his hair flecked with gray, his figure stolid as though he had emerged from the city's stone walls. He strode beside Ani and watched the streets as cautiously as he had ever attended the east gate of the White Stone Palace. No one spoke. She felt the weight of their lives like the pressure of a wind at her back. She was neither queen nor general, but they followed her.

A wall ringed the palace, its tops fanged with iron spikes, its stones charred by ancient battles. The palace gates were open; it seemed the king did not fear invasion while his army invaded. Ten guards stood at attention when Ani's group approached, eyeing the staffs that they carried like

weapons and their number, thirty youths and a man who despite his worn clothing had the gait and mien of a warrior.

"We're here to see the king," said Ani.

The guard in front shook his head. "Can't."

"This is about the war. We've discovered information that's essential before the invasion of Kildenree. We insist you let us pass, or at least send word directly to the king."

"Can't do it," said the guard. "Not the first, not the other. You're going to have to leave."

She wished, not for the first time, that she had been born with the gift of people-speaking. Ani was sure that Selia could have gotten past those guards with a few seductive words. Ani saw Talone grip the hilt of his sword. There had to be a way to get to the king without drawing weapons. She would not kill palace guards or allow the workers to risk themselves in a vain brawl.

"Please," she said, addressing all the guards that blocked the gateway. "Any of you. Just send him a message. We have to speak to the king."

"Can't be done," said the guard.

A breeze tickled Ani's ear, suggesting a way through. She shook her head. A wind like the one that had formed on the goose pasture against Ungolad might blow down a few guards, but there would be more to take their place. After a display like that, she would find herself trapped in a cell below the palace, listening to the winds trickle through the bars to bring news of death in Kildenree.

"Then at least tell me this—"

"Can't tell you anything, either," said the guard.

"Who's that with the Forest accent and all the can'ts?" A worker stepped forward from the middle of the mob. He was Offo, one of the older sheep boys, and had never spoken a word to Ani. She had wondered why he accompanied her now and assumed his Bayern restlessness was lured by the idea of a fight. With a mild dread, she waited to hear what Offo would say.

"Is that Ratger? Look at that, Beier, it's Ratger, our pig boy of late."

Beier nodded his shaggy head and kept his expressions smooth and disinterested. "I heard his brother married a city girl and the pig boy moved in with them, got civilized and given a javelin and shield at wintermoon near three years ago. All grown up and guarding the gate now. Too high for us."

“Oh, shut it, Beier,” said the guard Ratger, “I got to do my job. If some merchant-faced velvet-wearer comes down to your field and says, ‘Give me a pig, please,’ you’d tell him to shove coal in his mouth and swallow hard.”

“And if he’s an old friend and asks me real nice to give a message to the pig, I’d do it with a smile.” Offo’s lips curled up in an exaggerated smile, revealing teeth large and square like a mule’s. Ratger rolled his eyes and stomped his feet twice in irritation. He no longer seemed the stoic guard.

“Play along here, Ratger,” said Razo. He stepped up with a straight spine and extended neck, pleading every inch out of his short frame. “You know, this’s the goose girl what defended her flock from five muscle thieves—alone. You ever do anything like that? The king wanted to honor her, you know, and he won’t be real pleased to hear you’ve stopped her at his gate as though she were the thief and you full of airs.”

Ratger glanced back at Offo’s mock smile and sighed. “Quit your grinning, Offo. I can’t take you to the king. And I can’t deliver a message. He isn’t even here. They’re all gone, marched with the army, off to marry the prince somewhere.”

“Where?” said Ani.

“I don’t know.” Ratger spoke with sarcasm thick as maple sap. “Somehow the prince forgot to invite me to his wedding.”

“Tatto!” Enna pointed to the far side of the palace courtyard, where the young page was ambling in the afternoon shade, swinging an empty errand basket.

“Tatto!” shouted Ani through the shoulders of the guards. He turned to see the workers’ mob all staring at him through the gate of bodies and loped to them with a smile.

“Come to see me?” he said.

“To see the king, you nit,” said Enna. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know, but not because I’m just an apprentice page, but because no one really knows, except it’s probably at some country house grand enough for a wedding and on the way to war. I guess they don’t want a lot of uninvited guests showing up.” He eyed them sharply, letting them know that they were uninvited as well.

“I need your help,” said Ani, “so stay put for a minute.”

He folded his arms and looked up at her. “Are you really what they all”—he waved a hand at the jam of workers—“say you are?”

“I am,” said Ani.

“I thought so. I told my da, ‘She wouldn’t see the king. She’s hiding something, that goose girl with her broken staff and her hat and her goose talk and her pretty hands.’” Tatto blushed suddenly and looked down.

“Ratger, are you under orders not to tell me anything?” said Ani.

Ratger glanced briefly at Offo and then back at Ani. “No, I guess not.”

“Then can you tell me the name of the prime minister?”

“Thiaddag,” said Ratger.

“Right. But there was one I met about six years ago when he traveled to Kildenree. Is he still alive?”

“That would be Odaccar,” said one of the guards. “He’s retired, got old suddenly, sick or something.”

“That’s right,” said Ratger. “He’s in the severance quarters, over the carriage houses.”

“Ah,” said Ani, beginning to feel some relief. “Tatto, I need you to be quick. Go to Odaccar. Tell him who I am, tell him I’m waiting here at the gate for permission to pass and see him.” She turned to Ratger. “And if he calls for me, it’s all right that I pass?” The guard nodded his assent, and Tatto ran off.

When he returned, the guards let Ani, Talone, Finn, and Enna through the gate. The others they insisted remain behind, to display their power as guards, Ani thought, and to get answers. She had gone only a few steps into the courtyard when she heard Ratger say, “Now, Offo, who is she?”

Tatto led the four to the inner courtyard by following the outer wall, insisting that taking them through the palace would mess up the floor polish, and then up the stairs of the carriage houses. The long white corridor was lined with unadorned pine doors, most of them opened, revealing small, clean bedrooms. In each room’s one chair sat dim-faced hall-servants, hall-mistresses, and chamber-lords, retired servants of high degree, staring out the single window at the inactive courtyard. Their hair was white as mourning clothes and eyes often expressionless, watching for death. One woman turned as they passed her door, and Ani nodded. The woman turned back to her window.

Near the end of the corridor they found the former prime minister’s apartment. He, too, sat in his chair and stared at his windowpane, but when he turned to the noise at his door, thoughtfulness announced itself in the lines on his brow, and his eyes were full of curiosity. She remembered first hearing the Bayern accent from his mouth, how his words had seemed

stitched together, one following the other in seamless succession. She had loved the sound. She checked herself now, making sure she addressed him in her Kildenrean accent.

"Sir, I met you once when I was a girl and you had come to my mother's kingdom."

He nodded, but his brows creased together. "You're not the one I met with the prince." He shook his hand as though gesturing at everything at once. "We arranged a marriage, I remember that. But a different girl's marrying him." He shrugged. "You both look near the same to me."

Ani, waiting for his permission, sat on the edge of his bed and told the story of the designs and murders and war. The old man listened carefully, interjecting questions and receiving the answers with a deepening of wrinkles on his forehead.

"It is true, sir," said Talone. "I am the last witness of the massacre."

"And I saw the false princess's guards twice try to kill this yellow lady," said Enna.

The prime minister made a tsk, tsk sound. "War. That's what killed the old king and his other sons some years ago. That's what that lovely queen and I were trying to avoid, and look at it all come down on us like so many hunting falcons. Can't stand war. Gets in the way of order and process and all the good things. Thiaddag, now, he loves the stuff. Can't get enough of it. Eats it up like blackberry pudding. And you know what I think about Thiaddag." He squinted and stuck out his tongue.

"They have gone north," said Ani, "toward the mountain pass to invade Kildenree, and in three days the prince and Selia will wed. Do you know where they might be?"

"Oh, yes. North. Wedding. They would've gone to the estate on Lake Meginhard. The king was married there himself. I was present. It'll become a tradition, I shouldn't wonder." His eyes livened with memory, and his thin lips took shape with a smile.

Ani breathed out a sigh. "Lake Meginhard. Good. At least we know where." She twisted to look at Enna. "Can we get there in three days?"

Enna shrugged. The only place she knew outside the Forest was the city. Ani could see Talone's jaw tighten in frustration that he did not know this terrain well enough to supply the answers.

"Three days . . ." Odaccar shut his eyes tight, as though trying to see a map in his mind. "On foot you might make it in three days, maybe four."

“That is not good enough.” Ani leaned forward and put her hand atop Odaccar’s. “Sir, we need horses. We must get there in time to stop the wedding and the war. If we don’t, people like Thiaddag get their way.” Odaccar winced at that. “You once held a great deal of power in this kingdom, sir. Do you have friends in the stables? Can you get us horses?”

“Me? No, they think I’m old and useless.”

“Please,” said Ani, refusing to give up. “We don’t have enough coin to buy horses. If we had the time and skill, I would try to steal them. I must get to Lake Meginhard in less than three days, and the only way I see to do that is to get horses today, with your help. Can you think of a way to help?”

Odaccar rubbed his forehead and frowned. “Maybe.” Then he smiled, and his wrinkles stretched into long, pleasant curves. “Maybe if they don’t know it’s I.” He stood up by his small desk and rummaged for parchment, sending Enna to water his inkpot. The four stood by, twisting their hands with anxiety while he scrawled on the paper with the thick, scratchy strokes of a worn goose quill. He produced a stamp with a silver handle from a small drawer and shook it in the air. “Bet they don’t know I kept one of these!” He inked it and stamped the bottom of the letter.

“There now, that’s your passport to horses. I don’t think even that tight-fingered stable-master’ll think to ask which prime minister signed this letter.”

Ani took his hands and thanked him.

“You have done a noble thing, sir,” said Talone.

Odaccar laughed out loud and slapped his belly. “It’s good to be needed, I think.” The wrinkles around his lips and nose gathered together as though they existed solely to bear up his smile.

Ani sent Enna and Finn, the parchment drying in Enna’s hand, to find the stable-master. She begged Tatto to escort her and Talone to Selia’s quarters.

“This is good, Talone. If we can get to Lake Meginhard in time, this’ll be better than meeting the king today in my goose girl clothes. I just need one of my old dresses from Selia’s wardrobe, and then I think we can play Princess Napralina-Victery and her escort guard convincingly enough to get us through the doors.”

“Wait, wait, Isi,” said Tatto. “Do you know how wrong it’d be to break into the princess’s room, and me an oath-sworn page and due to receive my shield and javelin in two years?”

“I have to get a proper dress, Tatto, or they’ll never believe I’m the princess’s sister come to see the wedding. Anyway, it’s actually my apartment, isn’t it? Is it against your oath to lead the princess to her own room?”

“And if we get caught and they don’t believe you’re the princess—”

“Just tell them I bewitched you,” said Ani. Her eyes opened wider, her closed lips turned upward teasingly, and though the room was still, Ani caught at a slight breeze and her hem and sleeves and the loose end of her headscarf rustled in the invisible current. “That shouldn’t be too hard to believe.”

Tatto swallowed visibly and nodded. Talone stared, and she became self-conscious and released the wind.

“I told you,” she said to Talone.

“I suppose I thought you were being metaphorical.” He grinned and shook his head. “If your mother saw you . . .”

No one questioned their errand through the palace, though the pageboy wiped his sweating palms on his tunic and tensed at every sentry’s station, expecting to be pounced on and flung into a dungeon. At last he gestured to a set of doors, enjoined them to behave, and retreated down the corridor.

The doors were a double set of heavy, dark walnut, their borders engraved with climbing vines and half-opened blossoms. The brass knobs turned without stop, and they entered.

A long window breathed out over the courtyard and filled the room with light. Dark wood couches with thin velvet cushions, lamps that sparkled with dangling crystals, rugs so deep they kept the impression of her boot after she stepped away, walls painted deep orange and mahogany, tapestries of forest animals with starry eyes and horns in gold thread, curtains of curious weaving in all the natural colors that could be seen from the window, the odor of pure beeswax and rosewater. Ani felt doused by luxury, held underwater without breath. Her eyes sought out simplicity—she found a mirror and her own face.

This would have been my room, she thought.

“Would you stay here a moment, Talone?” Ani said. She left the main room for the changing room and found a wardrobe full of gowns that when rustled released the sweet, sharp scents of cloves and lavender. Not all the dresses she had brought from Kildenree were hanging from the steel hooks. Most noticeably the gold-and-white one was absent, the one the thread-

mistress had intended for her bridal gown. Ani took down the pale lake green dress that had been dyed to match her eyes, held it to her chest, and looked at the long mirror. She thought, *I look like a goose girl holding up a fancy dress*.

Ani pulled loose her headscarf and let it fall to the floor. "I will not hide anymore," she said to her reflection. Two feet, one in the mirror and one in the world, kicked the scarf aside. Her hair, braided up, had loosened, and its weight pulled it out of its plait and off her head. She picked up one of Selia's—one of her—brushes, silver plated, the face of a horse a rigid knob on its handle, and broke her snarls loose. The sun was dipping low in the west and sent a lustrous orange glow from the horizon to her hair. She moved, and it flashed gold in the light. She held up the dress against her now, the ray of setting sun brightening her eyes, painting her face a yellow rose, regal as her mother.

"But different," she whispered. "Not her. Me. Ani. Isi."

She carefully folded the green dress and wrapped it up in linen she stripped from the princess's bedchamber. She took only one swift, envious glance at the mattress two hands high and let her body briefly ache at that sight, her back and legs still sensing every slat of her little bed that leaned up against the west wall.

Ani had just uncovered a pair of calfskin slippers dyed beech bark gray when she heard from the other room the sound of metal jarring against metal. She peered through the door. Talone stood in the center of the room with exposed sword, his expression deadly, and before him stood Ishta.

Ishta closed the door behind him and locked it with an unsettling click. He smiled, and Ani remembered the stink of his mouth when he'd held her hand to his lips at winter-moon, *I will bite off a finger* and his teeth, crooked and brown, giving the impression that the man was rotting from the inside.

"Alive, I see," said Ishta, his eyes on his former captain. He pulled his sword from its scabbard and shifted it against the sunlight, reflecting beams on Talone's face like pale, cancerous patches. "How lovely. I love that repeating dream where I get to kill you again and again."

"Ishta," said Ani.

He saw her and his brow raised, surprised but not displeased.

"For honor's sake, Princess," said Talone, "I ask to fight him alone." Ani understood he did not wish for a wind to push the fight in his favor, and she nodded.

“Yes, no calling for help, little princess,” said Ishta. “The good captain wishes to die in private.” He smiled at Talone. “I hope you are not still upset about my killing Dano that day in the forest. I seem to recall that just because all Dano had to defend himself was his cooking knife, you put up such a stink. That is, until Ungolad ran you through.”

Talone’s temper did not display itself on his face. He gripped the hilt and swayed a moment on his feet, as though testing the strength of the floor. Then his blade rose, slicing through the beam of sunlight and falling hard on Ishta, his own blade held out in front of him, his smile twisted into a scowl. Ishta returned the hack, and the metal rang together, a mortal bell. Neither spoke. It was not a game of young warriors testing their strength or a match of pride, but a bout of death, each warrior watching his opponent’s eyes, fighting to end that life, their swords desperate vessels of their will. With each blow the other hoped to meet flesh, and each blow brought sword on sword, and the clanging was a wicked rhythm. Ani could not help the trembling in her legs, but she dared not sit. The force of Ishta’s strike pushed Talone to the ground. He held him there, his sword pressing Talone’s defense closer to his throat. Ishta glanced up at Ani, and for one moment the expression in his eyes said, *Next. You’re next*.

Talone thrust the guard backward and against a thin-legged table that splintered and sank under his weight. Talone took the moment to gain his feet before Ishta’s blade was drawn high and striking against his own. The guard had fire in his eyes, and he yelled in anger at every thrust that was countered, again, again, again, until he drove his blade with full force toward Talone’s breast. Talone dodged the thrust bodily. Ishta had swung too hard, expecting to be stopped by Talone’s blade. The weight of his sword and the momentum pulled him forward, and he stumbled. Talone turned, smooth as a diving hawk, and put his sword tip through Ishta’s body. Through his back and into his heart, as Ishta had done in the Forest to young Adon months ago. Ishta let out a high, quick gasp, crumpled face first on the floor, and did not move again.

“Talone,” said Ani.

“He was angry.” Talone’s breathing was heavy. “He should not have fought me angry.”

Talone dragged the body behind a low couch. Where Ishta had fallen lay a small pool of blood, dark red on darker wood, like a new moon on a black sky. Talone sat on the edge of a delicate, bird-legged lounge and looked at

that dark pool. *This man*, thought Ani, *should have a home and a round-cheeked grandson on his knee, not a stained blade.*

"Are you all right?"

"Better than I would be if he had got me first. I don't like killing."

Ani stood at the feet of the corpse, holding her bundle to her chest. "Should I cover him?"

"No, leave him be," said Talone.

He stood and exchanged his Forest-wrought blade for the dead man's truer steel, more like the sword he had carried as captain of the princess's guard. It occurred to Ani that it might even be the same blade.

"Time we left."

They abandoned Ishta to discovery sometime by some unlucky maid, closing the door behind them.

Chapter 19

In the yards, the stable-master, an older man with a young man's head of hair and a distracted expression, was directing the preparation of a dozen horses, all short, skinny, or old, and at least one betrayed features of donkey heritage.

"That won't be enough, Talone," said Ani.

"Perhaps not," he said, "but I would be surprised to find a dozen in our company that know riding."

Ani and Talone approached, and the stable-master squinted his eyes at them and came forward, his gait awkward as a new colt.

"You responsible here?" he asked Talone.

"I am," said Ani.

His face swung to hers, and he eyed her uncovered hair.

"Are these all the mounts you have available?" said Ani.

"Who are you?" The stable-master had a faint whine in his voice. "What're these animals needed for?"

"Business of war," said Ani. "And that's all you need know when the prime minister orders. Now, we asked you concerning the mounts."

Ani had hoped the bold words might not seem too silly coming from her and surprised herself at how natural they sounded. Talone looked at her, his eyes smiling.

"Look here," said the stable-master, "most of the mounts've gone north, and we've got to keep a fair supply for messengers and emergencies, as the prime minister would know if he wasn't so absorbed in war, war, war, and gave a thought to animals and common sense."

"What about that one?" Ani pointed to a far stable near the one where she had seen Falada. A tall bay paced his enclosure.

"That horse's not for riding, miss. He's still wild, and doesn't respond to less experienced riders."

Ani smiled. "I've ridden him. I'll take the bay."

The stable-hands thought it would be good sport to let the yellow-haired girl saddle the bay herself, and they sat back, prepared to be amused. One called, "Watch those razor-sharp hooves now, little girl," and others

laughed. A few minutes later, Ani walked the bay out of the corral, his hooves lifting high as though on parade. Ani smiled from the saddle.

"Could you shut that gate for me? Thank you kindly."

The jeering stopped, and the group of chagrined stable-hands dispersed.

Talone, Finn, and Enna all mounted, Finn the most uneasily, gripping his docile mount so tightly that the animal did not know whether to run, buck, or sit still. The four led the remaining horses out to the front gate and were greeted by an astonished and delighted cheer. Those who could ride quickly volunteered to escort the princess north.

"Please be a truer escort than my first," she said.

Among the volunteers was the palace guard Ratger.

"You'll be expelled," said one of his comrades. "You'll be labeled a traitor and a post-quitter. You'll never be allowed to enter a barrack or tavern again."

"This's the real princess," said Ratger, mounting the last horse. "And a murderer and liar's about to wed our prince and trick us into war. Tell me if my going isn't fulfilling my post more than standing by, watching the army march away and waiting like a fancy column by a gate where nothing happens."

"Welcome to the company of the true yellow girl," said Razo.

Conrad was among the riders, and he spoke up then for the first time. "She's the yellow lady, you dolt. Can't you see she's a lady?"

Ani's four gold coins bought food and blankets, packed on two of the horses, and then hats and clothings for the workers that were muted in color and could be mistaken for Kildenrean design. Ani hoped they might pass for Kildenreans long enough to get inside the gate. After that feat was accomplished, all she could do was tell her tale. At the thought, her stomach felt sick. She was certain the royal audience would not be so easy to please as weary Forest workers clamoring for a bedtime tale.

It was full night by the time the company of eleven was on the road north, the outside of the city wall just a dark border to their left. They rode for two hours, then camped by the road and slept without fire. They rose at dawn and rode all day.

Ani was immediately grateful for Ratger. The guard was the only member of their company who had ridden the road to the lake and had seen maps of this part of Bayern. Ani spent the morning by his side, learning all she could of the king and the encounter to come.

“You’re so quick to answer my little queries, Ratger. At the palace gate, you clung to the suspicion and stubbornness that I’d expect from any Forest-born, but now you’re as easy in talking as a magpie.”

“Well, why not?” said Ratger. “We’re on the same side, and there’s little time to waste.”

“But why’d you believe them that I’m the princess?” said Ani.

Ratger shrugged. “You look like a princess. You seem like a princess. I saw the other one a few times, and now that I’ve seen you, I like you better.”

“Well, for whatever reason, I’m grateful,” she said, though his easy loyalty disturbed her even as it gratified her. She mulled over his statement under the conversation-stifling afternoon sun.

“Sometimes it seems my identity’s a matter of opinion,” Ani said later as she rode with Talone at the head of the company, hoping to pull the pace faster. Talone insisted they arrive by the next day, saying that once Selia wed the prince, their job would be near impossible.

“How’ll we achieve it at all?” said Ani. “She rode into town with light-colored hair wearing my dress, and they accepted her as the princess. I show up with lighter hair, and the workers, the former prime minister, and at least one palace guard vote for me. Will our fate be decided when we stand side by side and the king judges which of us looks the most like a princess?”

“You have truth on your side,” said Talone.

“And on her side, the gift of people-speaking. I don’t think this can be a mere matter of telling the truth.”

“Nor do I,” he said. “That is why you do not go alone.”

They had passed sight of the walled city late that morning and rode through its sprawling villages most of the day. The road was wide, trampled hard as stone from centuries of hooves and cartwheels, and edged with houses and taverns, and people who peered curiously at the ragtag band and their unlikely leader. “Another yellow girl,” Ani heard someone say. By late afternoon, the road crossed the borders of a farm and into uncultivated fields, leaving behind the smells of smoke and cows. The afternoon light picked white tree seeds out of the air, like suspended snowflakes too light to fall. The voice of the wind that came out of the wood was husky and restless. Then, from ahead, the wind brought images of men and horses.

“Could we already be near, Ratger?”

“No, tomorrow’s ride, at least.”

“Then we’re coming up on another company.”

She led them off the road and they walked their horses along its side, moving in and out of scattered spruce and aspen. At length, they saw a forest lane that converged on the main road. From it came a company of foot soldiers and some mounted men. They were many times larger than their own, each man carrying a javelin, iron points up and tipped with afternoon light like many tiny stars. Their shields were brightly painted.

“A hundred-band,” said Razo. “See their shields? The spruce tree and four stars—they’re the hundred-band from Urifel.”

“Every village forms a hundred-band for a war, Isi,” said Enna. “Usually they’re made up of the younger men old enough to’ve received their javelin and shield, and older men who’ve never killed before. They’re part of the community when they get a javelin, but they’re men after their first kill, so they all want to kill. If you see any with beards, those are the ones who really take it seriously and won’t shave, ever, until they’ve killed an enemy. The mounted men, those’re the experienced fighters and are given command and a horse in battle. The rest fight from the ground.”

“The army must be gathering at the lake,” said Talone.

“One hundred from every village,” said Ani. “Enna, how many villages does Bayern claim?”

“I don’t know, maybe fifty, maybe two hundred.”

“If that army crosses the mountain pass, they could wipe out Kildenree. My mother thinks she just made a marital alliance. Kildenree’s not prepared. Even so, I know they’ll fight. And all this so Selia can hide her deceit.”

A few supply wagons trailed the soldiers, two carrying women—young women with babies in their arms, small children at their feet leaning out of the wagons to watch the wheels spin.

Ani looked at Enna. “They take their wives to war?”

She nodded. “It’s been a tradition for centuries. All Bayern children’re raised on stories of the ancient days and heroes and warriors, when gods still lived in the forest and spoke through sacred horses. It used to be that Bayern armies were aggressive, and every man was a warrior, not just a bully who carries his javelin into taverns. The peace-keepers say they’re the last guardians of the old ways, but I think the old ways just meant attacking every nation that touched our lands.”

“Yes.” Ani had read some of that history in Geric’s book. Only the immensity of the Forest and the formerly impassable mountains had protected Kildenree all those centuries.

The last of the hundred-band and their families trailed out of sight into the horizon of the road, and Talone motioned that it was time to mount again. They had no real reason to hide, but Ani wished to avoid having to explain themselves to anyone before they reached the estate, so the party skirted the road, out of sight, passed the slower moving hundred-band, and rejoined the road some distance in front. Talone kept a steady pace for the remainder of the day. The damp night descended, and the wood by the road trembled with voices of crickets and the hard wings of hunting birds.

They halted off the road near the line of trees. Talone made a fire. Its light sought out the faces of the company attending to their horses and feeling the ground with booted feet for smooth places without stones. Its light gathered them and kept them in its circle. They ate and talked, and sometimes were silent, the fire the only movement, each watching the flames lick the air and thinking of the next day. Enna sang a Forest song. Her voice was high and soft and simple, and she sang of a carpenter’s daughter who fell in love with a tree, and of her father, who carved the tree into a man. Her voice faded, and Ani again became conscious of the croaks of night insects that came from the wood at their back and all around, surrounding them, an overwhelming army.

“Isi, tell a story,” said Razo.

“Oh, you know all my stories now,” said Ani. “I’d like to hear one. Do you have one, Enna?”

“There’s the history or legend, I don’t know which, of why our women go to war.”

“Yes, that’s perfect.”

Enna was silent a moment, the thoughtful crease between her eyes as dark in the faint firelight as the infinite blackness of the Forest night. Her eyes were distant, and she seemed to be listening to that voice that first told her the story, a mother, sister, or aunt. Then her voice, like her singing, cut through the crickets and crackling fire.

“There was a battle between Bayern and Tira, a kingdom to the southeast. The battle was so great that all the feet and falling bodies broke the earth, and the sweat of the warriors slipped into the cracks and soaked into the soil, and to this day, that plain in the south of Bayern’s a marsh where no

one can farm. The leaders were killed, and the men of Bayern ran away. At the camp, the women waited for the battle to be over and victory to be bawled to the trees and hills and its echoes to ring like a bell, as had always happened. But this time their men ran back shouting, 'Vanquished! Vanquished!'"

"Vanquished," said Razo.

"Vanquished," Offo repeated. They nodded, remembering the tale.

Enna continued. "The women left their babies in their tents and came forward as one to meet their fleeing husbands. They slipped their dresses from their shoulders and let them fall to their waist, and stood there in the road, in the daylight. 'See me,' said each wife to each husband, 'see me as you first saw me, your bride in your bed when your warrior hand first touched my skin. See me as you saw me when I suckled our first baby, his eyes like your eyes looking up at mine. See me now, as the enemy'll see me when he carries me off to his dirty bed and his bastard children.'

"The men cried, and their hearts hurt more than their wounds, seeing what defeat meant, seeing what would be lost. When the enemy gained on their flight, the men turned and stood and fought the Tiran in their own camp, where wives looked on from the tents and wagons and mothers nursed their babies and watched their husbands fight to victory."

Finn sat near Ani, and she saw his face change color from merely reflecting the orange light of the fire to a flushed red. He stared down at his hands, shaking his head.

"You all right, Finn?" said Ani.

"I never understood that story," he whispered uncomfortably. "If I saw all those women—I'd want to hide."

"It's about fighting for what's most valuable," said Enna. She raised her brows in good humor. "Wouldn't you want to fight for me, Finn?"

"Yes, I would. But you wouldn't have to—show—me anything."

Enna smiled at him, and Ani saw the shadow of his hand touch Enna's fingers.

"Tomorrow," said Ani in a voice that raised all the faces to her, and the hollows under their eyes filled with light, and their hair was flushed with the colors of dark fire, "I don't want you taking risks. If I'm not able to get to the king or to convince him, it won't do you any good to rush about looking for a head to bash." She looked from their faces to watch the flames kick the logs they burned. "I hope this works. I hope they believe I'm my

sister and you my escort from Kildenree, and just let us in. And I hope the king listens and believes. No matter what happens, I want to thank you. It's a comfort to have you by my side."

Voices around the fire murmured affirmation. Talone's expression was calm and determined, the face of a soldier prepared for battle. She was relieved that at least one person knew what he was doing. She put down her bedroll and wondered if she could sleep with thoughts of tomorrow. Her plan, if it worked, would get them through the gate. After that, the only power she could depend on was that of words, and her weaknesses haunted her. Just after closing her eyes, Ani was greeted by the first images of a dream—Ungolad at her heels, and instead of running, she reached out for aid. Her fingers touched darkness.



Ani rose before first light and slipped away from the workers, just gray, still shapes under shared blankets. The winds were whispering of a stream nearby, and she searched their images for a deep place, finding it behind a tangle of wild raspberry. She walked there, stripped, and used its brambles as a bath curtain. *I'm bathing*, she told herself, *because I need to look the part of a princess, not on the chance that Geric might be there among the prince's guard*.

The water was so cold, she gasped when she surfaced and bit her lip to hold back a yelp. The stream moved softly there and was deep enough for her to submerge her chin while she balanced her toes on a slick stone somewhere under the green-blackness. She had to clamber up the slippery bank to scrub her hair and body with the hard, burnt-smelling block of dish soap, and then she leapt back in, gasping. She dried herself with Gilsa's tunic, gratefully put back on her shift, and finally donned the lake green gown and slippers she had taken from Selia's wardrobe.

When she entered camp, the morning preparations halted with a hush. For the sake of her impractical slippers, she had to weave her path around muddy spots where dishwater had been thrown and hold up the hem of her dress in one hand as a lady would do when braving stairs or stepping out of a carriage. Razo whistled through the space in his teeth.

"Yellow lady," said Offo, grinning.

“Now mark this, all honor the princess,” said Ratger in serious, trained-guard tones. One by one they bowed, some falling to one knee. Enna curtsied deeply and did not meet Ani’s eyes.

“Stop that,” said Ani. “Oh, stand up, now, you know it’s just the dress.”

“You look very lovely,” said Conrad, still managing to sound perfunctory.

“I thank you, sir.” She ruffled his scruffy head with her hand, and he nearly loosed a smile. “And now that I’ve my costume, you all need to put on yours. All but Talone make sure your hats cover your hair, and ladies, wrap your heads. Pull them as low as you can, though I don’t think the charade’ll take long enough to allow them a good look at your eyebrows. You don’t look Kildenrean, but at least let’s not make it obvious that you’re Bayern.”

While the others ate and packed up the camp, Enna insisted on brushing the wetness out of Ani’s hair with the pilfered silver brush.

“I can do that,” said Ani, still feeling self-concious in her princess garb among her worker friends. She reached up to take the brush from Enna.

“Oh, leave it,” Enna said, and slapped her hand away.

“We should help pack up camp,” said Ani. Enna ignored her.

“Your hair’s like a streak of sunlight through a window,” she said. “Like a river in the morning. I don’t know, but something pretty. You’re different this morning, Isi. You don’t look like the goose girl anymore.”

“I hope I’ll always be, even if I become a princess again.” Ani smoothed the fabric against her leg, soft as moss. “But I wonder if you’re readying me for court or to be laid out in my coffin.”

Enna rapped her lightly on her head with the brush. “Now stop that or you’ll have us all in jitters.”

Kit, a quiet worker with a mess of black curls, stood by watching. He timidly put a hand to Ani’s hair, like a nest-building crow charmed by a shiny object.

“A warning there, pig boy,” Conrad shouted from across the camp. “Don’t touch her hair without leave, or keep a good hold on your hat.”

Ani laughed.

Talone stomped down the breakfast fire. Hard embers crushed beneath his heel, a sound like weak bones breaking. He looked around.

“Time to ride.”

Chapter 20

The party rode at a brisk pace for half a day, stopping only to water their horses and briefly allow those unused to much riding to touch their feet to steady ground and stretch out the sitting sores. The road moved past scattered farms and settlements until the occasional houses clustered into a village and the village led into a town visible from the road as orange-tipped towers and rooftops, the bells tolling absolute noon. They did not leave sight of houses again.

When the afternoon dazzled the west, the road arched down into a broad valley flanked by a wide, gray river. Over a rise, they could see where the river fattened into a lake, the waters flat as a coin in the still afternoon. The estate on its near shore was all of pale yellow stone, its many banners held up in the wind like raised hands, its many chimneys and turrets slender and high, ladies' fingers pointing straight to the sun, and the whole structure proclaiming itself and shouting, *Glory, glory.*

There were shouts from the valley. It was a broad bowl, cleared of trees and filled from rim to rim with the shining, living ocean of the army. The royal army and all the present hundred-bands from villages across the kingdom camped in a wide, open circle around the estate, each centered by a brightly colored tent for their leaders, each bearing the vivid banner of their shields. Ani felt there was no relief from the constant motion of dark heads, the glaring metal of weapons and armor, the colors of the tents, banners, and painted shields. Some bands marched in their camps, circles within circles spinning as they walked, staggered lines playing at advancing and retreating.

Out of the commotion came the notes of a song, loud and perfect. Not far from where Ani's group paused, a hundred-band stood at attention. They rested their round shields on their right shoulders, the rim pressed to their cheeks, the hollow belly of the shields turned to their mouths. Into that metal bowl the soldiers sang a war song. Soon other hundred-bands joined in. The sound rang off the iron and pushed into the air toward the estate and beyond, to the place where Ani's company stood. The song against metal was strange and loud, the notes a flock of fierce, scattered birds, the melody the sound of war.

“Oh,” said Ani, as though she finally understood. “I think they must love that sound. It makes my bones feel cold.”

“Indeed,” said Talone.

“Talone, this is impossible. This can’t be done.”

Talone looked over the valley, and she thought he was estimating the numbers of soldiers and counting the banners. He squinted against the sun. “What did your horse say to you, that last word you said you heard?”

Ani thought it was an odd question but answered, “He said, he called me Princess.”

Talone nodded. “Lead the way, Princess.”

In the valley at her feet, the distant soldiers milled around like ants, the thousands of spear tips sparkling like sunlight on a handful of sand. She sat up straight and felt the bay tense beneath her, ready for command.

“Yes, all right, let’s go.”

They rode in formation like a flock of geese: Ani at the lead, followed by Talone and Ratger, then Enna and Finn, Razo and Offo, and so on. Ani sat tall in her saddle. Her stirrups were lost in the long hem of her skirts, her hands were poised with reins ready to command, her hair fell down her back, her head was up. She visualized her mother and commanded her body to feel that form—regal, imperious. The guards along the valley road watched the company’s passing with wonder and apprehension. Who was this Kildenrean girl entering the camp of the army about to invade Kildenree? Because their numbers did not pose a threat, they were not stopped, though Ani could see runners taking the word of their coming to each subsequent post. When she could pick out the faces of the estate gate guard from the haze of distance, she saw they were alerted and awaiting their arrival with stern curiosity.

Ani stopped her bay short of the gate, as though expecting that it would open automatically before her. She could hear the company behind her stop quickly, the restless shifting of saddles like the creak of old wood, the whisk of a horsetail, the light thud of a quarterstaff resting on the ground. The guard stared at her with austere patience.

Ani opened her mouth to speak. Her throat felt cold, and she bade her voice not to shake. “I am Napralina-Victery Talianna Isilee, second daughter of Kildenree and granted emissary of her queen. I am arrived to be witness to the wedding of my sister, Anidori-Kiladra, the first daughter. Escort us to the king immediately.”

The guards' formality slipped from their faces like drops of sweat, and they stared with open incredulity. No one addressed her. No one moved.

"Permit me to repeat myself. I said, Please allow my escort to pass and let us present ourselves to the king immediately so we may pay our respects. I expect to see the king first and no other. We have been traveling through hard weather these months to arrive in time and have suffered losses of both wagons and a small number of my guards. I take it most unkindly to be kept mounted at the gate."

"We had no word of your coming," said a slender man slightly older than the rest. Ani turned to him as the possible captain of the watch.

"I am sorry for it. After our losses, I could not spare a guard and dared not send one of my waiting women alone. All the more reason to inform the king of our arrival immediately."

The slender man motioned to another guard and sent him running into the estate. They waited. The guards were eyeing her mount, her dress, the aspect of those who followed her, measuring her words against her appearance. She could see immediately that if she had walked up as the goose girl alone or with a couple of animal-keeper friends, these guards would have sent her out of the valley with a sword at her back. At least that much of the plan was working. They were passing for Kildenreans and just might be let through the gates. The workers wore their hats and caps, but on inspection, no one would mistake them for anything but Bayern. Ani prayed they would not be delayed enough to make time for a close look. She sat up straighter and felt the bay shift under her legs, hoping, perhaps, that her anxiety meant there would be some action.

The runner returned and whispered into his leader's ear. The slender guard nodded and gave silent commands to others.

"The king will grant an audience," he said.

Ani barely stifled a sigh of relief and readied herself to ride forward. Instead, two guards came to her side, one holding a stirrup while the other offered a hand to dismount. Disconcerted, she took the hand.

"Princess," Talone said uneasily.

The guard helped her down, took her arm, and walked her to the gate. Her company urged their steeds forward to follow.

"His Majesty the king wishes to see Princess Napralina-Victery privately and orders her escort to remain here."

Gasps escaped the mouths of her friends at her back like the fluttering of many wings.

“No,” said Talone. “She requires a personal guard. We will accompany her.”

Ani had two guards on either side now, holding her arms and pushing her inside the gate. She struggled, clumsily digging her slippered heels against the ground. “Wait,” she said, “I will not go with you without my guard.”

Talone jumped off his horse and ran after her. “Let me follow her. I tell you I will.”

“Unhand me. This is a gross insult. I will not go alone.”

Her captors took no heed of her protests. Four gate guards grabbed Talone. He struggled, and a guard took away his sword, pulled from its steel scabbard with a peal of metal on metal like the cry of a high voice. “Princess!” said Talone.

She looked back to see his face, wrinkled, travel stained, and worn, shut out by the closing of the iron gate. The guards held her closely, her feet barely pushing against ground to keep their pace. She struggled and protested and fought their grips. They gave no explanation. They continued their course.

Down they took her through the estate’s first long corridor and then ducked into a side room and shut the door. The room was dim, but Ani could see several people standing before her, lit from behind by the light of a window.

“Welcome,” said Ungolad.

Ani took in a sharp breath. A hand over her mouth stopped her scream.

All the remaining Kildenrean guards were there, lining the walls in front of dark shelves of books, their pale hair darker in the weak light. Swords at their side shivered silver in the obscurity, and each had a round shield strapped to their left arms as in preparation for battle. Selia rose from a chair against the window. The light was directly behind her. Her face was all in shadow.

“Thank you so much.” Selia motioned, and the guard behind Ani dropped his hand from her mouth.

“Selia,” Ani said in a whisper. “My lady-in-waiting. Won’t the king be expecting me?”

“In good time.” She stepped forward to place coins in the palms of the two Bayern soldiers, and they quickly left the room, shutting the door

behind them.

Ani saw now that Selia wore a bright yellow tunic and skirt in the Bayern fashion. On her forehead winked the three rubies of Ani's tiara. Three points of red like the blood of the lost handkerchief, as though Selia wore the mark of the queen's approval and protection. *False*, thought Ani. *It's all show. Like the handkerchief. Like my mother's love.* But the sight of it bothered her, and she wanted to rip the circlet from her head and fling it away.

"Let me gut her right now," said Terne. His dagger rang as he ripped it from its sheath, and Ani's stomach muscles clenched. Selia held up her hand.

"Not here. My love, can you take her safely out of the estate?"

Ungolad nodded. He tickled Ani's chin with the end of one of his braids. "It will be easier if she is unable to scream."

"Don't touch me." Ani backed toward the door. A big man named Redmon was there. He put a hand on her back to stop her.

"I don't mean to kill you," said Ungolad. "I only mean to put you to sleep."

He stepped toward her. Ani felt a draft pass under the door and touch her ankle. In a panic, she spoke to it without waiting to gather more and sent it flying at Selia. A few papers rustled on the desk beside her. One piece of parchment flew off the desk and floated to the carpet like goose down on a breath of air. Her breeze died out, useless. Selia glanced back at the closed window, searching for its source.

"Stay away from me," said Ani. The guards looked unimpressed. She recalled the images that had been carried on that breeze—several guards moving down the corridor. Toward that room.

"Easy, now," said Ungolad as though speaking to an unpredictable animal.

Ani pointed at the door. "Wait. Someone is here."

There was a knock. Redmon started.

"What are you, some kind of Bayern witch?" he said.

"Who is there?" called Ungolad.

The door opened, pushing Redmon aside and admitting four soldiers with the purple slash of the king's own guard. "His Majesty has been informed that Princess Napralina-Victery arrived from Kildenree, and he calls her to his presence."

“Yes, certainly.” Selia stepped into the light of the open door, an easy smile on her lips.

Ani stepped away from Ungolad’s grasp and into the escort of the king’s guard. The Kildenreans followed, Selia at their head. There was a hum of anticipation. Even the king’s guards seemed to feel it, and they glanced from side to side with hands on sword hilts, anticipating action. Ani saw Selia lift her hand as if to calm her own mob, and her men followed quietly into the estate’s small throne room.

It was a long room with a row of narrow, high windows spilling patches of light onto the stone floor. Hard sunlight fell on the dais and chair at the far end where the royal party stood waiting—the king, the young prince she had seen at wintermoon, several others in hunting clothes, the prime minister wearing court apparel and a suspicious expression, and the royal guards. And one guard in particular who watched her approach with a kind of confused concentration, as though he sought to count colors on a moving banner. *My hair*, she thought. *Geric doesn’t know me for my hair.*

The guards at her side escorted her to the center of the room and withdrew. Selia and the Kildenreans gathered in a mob at the steps of the dais, facing her. Everyone was looking at her. They waited. She curtsied to the king.

“Princess Napralina-Victery,” said the king. He raised one eyebrow.

“No, I am not she,” she said in her careful, Kildenrean accent.

“Not Napralina?” The king’s voice was a hammer that rang against the stones.

“No, I am not, but—”

The king signaled, and Ani heard the thuds of the guards’ heavy boots approach from behind. Selia smirked.

“No, wait.” The words broke like sobs from Ani’s throat. A guard’s hand was on her shoulder, and she fell to both knees and threw her hands on the ground in front of her, as though she would cling to edges of the floor stones to remain. “Please, wait, listen to me.” The guards stood beside her now, close enough that she could feel the heat from their bodies on her back, but they did not pull her away. “Please.”

“One moment, sire.” Geric squinted against the sunlight that fell steeply through a high window and into his eyes. He took a step forward. The rays of light slipped off his shoulders and onto the ground, heavy as shadow, and his face dimmed to the light of the hall.

“Isi?” His face softened in recognition, then his mouth widened in that wonderful smile that made lines in his cheeks and brightened his eyes. “Isi, what’s going on?”

Clearly he expected her to smile back, to laugh with him and admit she was playing some clever joke. She wished she were, but just a glance at Ungolad ripped away any desire to smile. Crouched before Geric, she felt hollow and slight and wretched, and her stomach felt light enough to float up to her throat.

“Isi was my grandmother’s name, among friends,” she said. Her voice did not sound like a princess’s, rather squeaked from her throat, narrowly escaping its tightness. Geric’s eyes darkened under a frown line. She forced her gaze away from him and to the king, who watched her with barely controlled outrage. Slowly she stood, and the guards, for the moment, let her be.

“Sire,” she said, “I am Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, first daughter of Kildenree. That girl”—she pointed toward Selia without looking—“was my lady-in-waiting.”

The silence of the stone hall broke then with gasps and murmurs, but most clearly of all—a sound high and fierce that rose above the noise like a raptor’s cry—was a laugh. The other noises died away, and the laugh remained and became a lovely sound, dainty, artless, intelligent. Selia’s posture was confident and casual, and she seemed to light up prettily with the attention that focused on her. She smiled and addressed the king.

“My compatriots and I stood here in silence, Your Majesty, eagerly awaiting what word this lost bird would bear, and it has proved more entertaining than we had imagined. She is the princess!” Selia shook her head with a sympathetic expression.

“This is the little runaway I told you of, sire, the serving girl who decided in the Forest that she no longer wished to serve and slipped away in the night with one of my gowns and a bag full of coins. It would seem she still has the dress but has spent the coins—though how she managed that in just these few months might be answered only in a gambling hall or tavern. At any rate, it would seem she still does not wish to serve.” Selia crossed to Ani and put a soft hand on her shoulder with a benevolent, older-sister expression. “But really, Selia, is not crying ‘princess’ taking one step too far?”

Ani was still. She could feel Selia's words tremble and wind around the room like a tangible breeze. They slipped from Selia's mouth and hummed in her ears. *Watch that one*, Ani thought, *she has the gift of people-speaking*. Ani had never before felt the full force of Selia's ability. Her ears filled with Selia's words, her head bowed under the weight.

"No," she said. It was all she could say.

"Come now, my dear," said Selia. Her voice was slick like running water and low enough not to echo against stone. "Being a princess is more work than a lady-in-waiting. You should know; you have watched me most of your life." Her smile was only for Ani, and it revealed traces of spite and anger. Ani winced. "You have told me how you have felt being consigned to a life of servitude. I sympathize. I know you feel trapped by your birth and have seen your talents go wasted by the narrowness of your occupation. To wait. To sit and wait and serve your mistress. I can understand it must be frustrating. But, princess?" She laughed so lightly, it seemed to be not an expression of humor, but a gift to the listener. "And as much as it is a burden at times, I'm not going to resign on your behalf. So, please, for the friendship we once shared, admit the truth."

Selia was offering her the release of all trouble, the loosening of tension, a salve for fear. It could all end peacefully. Resolution, is not that what she wanted? Ani struggled against the sound of her voice, shaking her head to free it from her ears, to shake it from her hair, where it tangled itself and whispered relentlessly, *Tell the truth, resign, and tell the truth.*

"No," said Ani. The word was like a stone on her tongue. "I mean, yes, I have told the truth. I am who I say I am."

"Enough of this." The prime minister strode down the steps of the dais. He turned to the king, his short cape lifting with a snap. "Sire, we waste time here on this runaway thief while there are pressing matters of war."

"War," said Ani. The word awoke her senses, and her head lightened. "You started all of this, Selia, in the Forest. The guards, you murdered them. She murdered them all, sire, she and Ungolad and the others. And I ran, so she could not kill me, too. I have been hiding these months as a goose girl. I have witnesses who saw these men try to kill me just as they killed my guards."

Ani spared a glance for Geric to see if he believed her, but his face was somber and unreadable, like that of a guard on duty.

“Now, dear, don’t be silly,” said Selia. “All my guards are right here.” She gestured to the eighteen men behind her.

“No, the others. Where are Rashon, Ingras, Adon, and the others? And, and Radal, and Dano. Poor Dano, who looked up to the warriors as to older brothers and only ever carried a dinner knife in his belt, and”—her voice broke—“you killed him anyway. All of them, sire, all.”

Ani looked at Selia’s eyes for the first time. “Except Talone.”

Selia started to shake her head, then caught herself. Ani flashed a hopeful smile.

“You did not know that, did you? That he survived your slaughter? Sire, I beg you to ask my escort Talone. He is just outside the gates. Your guards would not admit him, but he stands ready to testify to you that what I say is true. He was there. He witnessed the massacre in the Forest.”

The Kildenrean guards looked at one another and murmured softly until Ungolad silenced them with one quick, slight look. Selia blinked.

“Ah, Talone, your cohort. Is he still with you?” Her voice lost its sweetness and almost betrayed real anger. Her lips curled slightly as though she would spit. “Of course, you would not be so brazen as to make these claims unless you had a false witness to improve the odds. He is so fickle, however, I would not have guessed him to stay with you since the Forest, once you lost your coin.”

The prime minister rustled his cape again. “Sire, the young prince is tired from the hunt, and this Kildenrean’s spy’s lies are none of his concern. I recommend he be saved from this raucous tedium.”

Ani looked over at the young prince. His face was pinched and white, and he tugged the bottom of his tunic with the self-consciousness of a boy who is growing too fast for his clothes. Again the thought of marrying him troubled her, but his sweet, boyish face invoked her pity as well. Knowing what she did, she could not abandon him to an unwitting marriage to the likes of Selia.

The king roughly wiped his brow. “Yes, I grow rather tired of it myself. Would that I had youth as an excuse to withdraw.” He waved a hand, and two guards, neither one Geric, began to escort the young prince from the room.

“Wait,” said Ani, afraid she was not being taken seriously, “shouldn’t the prince stay? After all, this is the matter of his bride.”

The prime minister laughed with scorn. “You see, Your Highness? She doesn’t even know what she’s saying.” He turned to Ani with an arch in one eyebrow. “The princess, of course, is betrothed to our elder prince, Geric.”

“Geric?” Ani felt as though all the wind had left her lungs, and she said his name with her last squeak of breath. “Geric is the prince?”

He met her gaze, his lips tight and thoughtful.

“You are?”

He nodded. His forehead was worried with lines, and while he stared at her, she found it hard to look away. She did not want to. She was afraid she was losing, losing the war and losing the fight for her name, and now, painfully, she realized she was also losing Geric.

“Isi, are you truly Kildenrean? Truly Anidori?”

“Yes, I am, I swear, I—”

The king grumbled. “What’s all this, Geric?”

Geric addressed the king, but he kept his eyes on Ani. “I knew this girl, before, as a goose girl.”

“You called her Isi,” said the king.

“Yes, that’s what she—that’s what I thought her name was.”

“And did she ever claim to you that she was the princess?”

“No, but—”

“Oh, sire,” said Selia with a sigh, “clearly she was trying to use the prince to win her little game.”

“Mmm,” said the king. Geric looked at her again, and the new doubt in his eyes hurt her like a slap.

“Sire, there are other matters that beg your attention,” said the prime minister.

“The war,” said Ani. She felt a new urgency to convince them, and she watched Geric’s face anxiously as she spoke. “It is her idea, the war. Kildenree is not plotting. There is no conspiracy. She invented it all to hide her bloody deeds.”

“Sire,” said the prime minister.

“Please listen to me. Geric, you know me. You must believe that what I’m saying is true.”

The prime minister huffed. “This is obviously a Kildenrean spy sent to thwart our endeavors.”

“She is a fraud,” said Ani. “All she says is a lie.”

“Sire, don’t let this yellow-haired wench craft doubt on our war.”

“Enough!” said the king. His face was red, and his eyes were on Ani.

“Sire,” said Geric, putting a hand on his arm, “we should listen to her.”

At Geric’s words, Selia frowned.

“We have listened enough.” The king shook off his son. “This girl announces herself as Napralina, then she says she’s Anidori, then you call her Isi, then she’s Selia. It appears that she’s also that goose girl who curtsies so prettily and was found spying around the royal stables last winter. Whoever she is, she’d better decide quickly so we know what to engrave on her tombstone. I smell treason.” The king stomped down the stairs and stood before Ani, his eyes searching her face for answers. “Anidori, my dear.”

Ani opened her mouth to answer.

“Yes, my lord,” said Selia.

“What’s the punishment for treason in Kildenree?”

Banishment, thought Ani, *but Selia will not say that*, and she noted that Selia’s eyes sparkled while she thought.

“My lord,” said Selia, “it is a grave crime and thus a public castigation. To be placed naked in a barrel full of nails and dragged through the streets by four white horses, I believe.”

A phantom pain prickled down Ani’s skin. She could not speak.

“You believe?” said the king. “Be sure. We’ve heard enough. She’s not our citizen or our concern. I’m seriously considering leaving her in the dungeon here until this war is through and I’ve a free moment to deal with such nonsense.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that, Father,” said Geric. “No one has proved she’s done anything criminal.”

“It’s wartime, Geric,” said the king. “I don’t need proof.” He stood up and gestured to the guards to carry her away.

“A moment,” said Geric with a staying hand. “As you said, she isn’t your citizen or your concern. Leave the girl here with her compatriots, and together they can arrive at a suitable resolution. Maybe the reminder of what her punishment might be will encourage her to tell the truth.”

“Fine.” The king looked at Selia. “Send for my chief guard in an hour. If you haven’t convinced her to tell the truth, we’ll lock her up until we’ve time for this.”

Ani looked at the Kildenrean guards. They were all smiling.

“No, Geric, you don’t understand them,” Ani said. “Please don’t leave me.” She followed the king and Geric to the door. The guards held her back.

“It’s for the best, Isi,” said Geric. He studied the room a moment, his eyes scanning the faces of the Kildenreans, before frowning and turning away.

“No,” she said as Geric and the king exited the room. “Don’t leave me here with them. They are murderers.” She tried to pull away from the two guards holding her arms and let her shouts chase down the corridor after Geric. “Come back, please!”

All the king’s guard were gone but her two captors. She turned to them, clinging to their tunics.

“Don’t leave me,” she said, sobbing, panic wretching her gut. “Please. Just you two stay.”

Ani would not let go, so one pushed her to the ground. She scrambled to her feet as they exited, closed, and locked the door behind them. She ran to the door and banged with her fists, calling after the guards, begging them to come back, to just ask the king and he would give them permission to guard her, ask the prince and come back. After a while she stopped banging and tried to hear over the sound of her own heaving breath if there was anyone on the other side of the door. Nothing. Silence.

She stood against it for a few moments, her forehead pressed on the polished grain, breathing against its closeness, feeling her breath touch the wood and bounce back to her face, hot and quick. A cold chill raced down her back. Behind her, the room was still.

Chapter 21

The one door was closed, the few high windows shut out any wind. Ani closed her eyes. There was no air stirring the tiny hairs on the back of her hand or passing across her neck. She felt no movement of any kind, save her heartbeat in her fingertips pressed against the door—a fast beat, the kind drummers played for their sorcerers when the trick reached its climax. At last she turned around.

They were all watching her, carrion crows perched on a fence, Selia the wild hunting cat in yellow. Selia stretched out a finger and motioned Ani forward.

"Away from the door," she said softly. "I would rather no one heard us just now."

Ani turned and leaned her back fully against the hard wall, letting her body soak in that last feeling of safety. Selia spoke a word, and Redmon and Uril grabbed her elbows and carried her to the far end of the room. Ani cried out but doubted anyone in the corridor heard or cared. They dumped her on the dais steps.

Selia stood over her. Ani stared at the hem of Selia's dress where the slant of light from a high window slashed it. The yellow was almost too bright to see, and she squinted, filtering the light through her lashes. She wondered if Selia would speak again and tangle her mind in words. She heard whispering and looked up. Ungolad stood close to Selia, his arm tight around her waist, his lips on hers.

"We have won," Selia said, and kissed him again. Ungolad caught Ani's eyes and leaned over her. One of his braids slapped her cheek.

"Little bird," said Ungolad, "the king sounded convinced, hmm? Aren't you proud of our Selia for thinking of such a diverting execution for you so quickly?"

"It seems you need the king's army to kill me, as you were so easily overwhelmed by two sleeping geese."

Ungolad pulled her arms and forced her to stand, and a thorny pain tore at her half-healed wound. She would not look at his eyes. She could feel the heat of his breath and of his anger on her cheeks.

"Why do you not crawl, little princess? Why do you not beg?"

“I hear you have been hiding as a goose girl all these months,” said Selia. “A shame you had to stoop so low only to be killed now.”

“Not so low,” Ani said. “Where is Yulan?” She felt bitterness like a hot wind prickle the skin of her face, and she wanted to hurt Selia somehow, see her composure fail.

“Where is Yulan?” said Selia in a mocking voice. “You think to surprise me? We heard of your little stunt from Ishta.”

“Ishta,” said Ani. “Last I saw, Ishta was bleeding on your bedroom carpets, though perhaps his body has already been found.”

Selia seemed to see Ani’s dress for the first time and recognize it from her wardrobe. She covered her mouth and muffled a scream of frustration. Her face flashed and reminded Ani of the tantrums she threw as a little girl. *She has not grown up*, thought Ani, *after all this time*. But the girl calmed herself with eerie speed. She dropped her hands to lift Ani’s chin and look in her eyes, speaking softly.

“These months have been really, really wonderful for me, Crown Princess. They truly have. I want you to know that. I have always known what I wanted, since I was a little girl, and you helped me to achieve it.” She kissed Ani’s forehead and caressed her cheek with her thumb. “Thank you. And thank you for coming back. My one last wish, even when I thought you were dead in the woods, was to let you see me being you and doing it better.”

Ungolad watched Selia, her every word fascinating him. He caressed her arm and murmured something low. Selia’s attention did not waver from Ani.

“But unfortunately you did cause one little bother. The king is unquestioning, but my betrothed, my prince, seemed to have some doubts because of your convenient acquaintance. He seemed to resolve them there at the end, but I want to be sure. I spent months working to own his heart, and I don’t wish to go through that process again. So, dearest, here is the plan. When they return, you will confess to the king that you made it all up and in fact are my serving girl, and in turn, I will talk him down from the crime of treason. You will live. If you like, I will even let you return to your little goose herd. Agreed?”

Ani bit her lip hard. The temptation to give in seemed to squeeze her ribs against her lungs. She spoke through clenched teeth. “Do you know why you have such trouble persuading Geric to love you? He fell in love with

me as the goose girl in my pasture months ago." *At least, I hoped he had*, she thought, but stared defiantly at Selia as though she had no doubts.

Selia slapped Ani's cheek. Ani stumbled backward and found herself in Ungolad's arms. He held both her hands behind her back and raised a knife to her throat.

"Listen to me, little bird," he said. "When they come back, you will say what my Princess Anidori-Kiladra tells you to."

The edge of his dagger was so close, she did not dare to swallow. The blade felt as sharp as fear. "You will not kill me here," she said.

"No?" said Ungolad. "And if I claim you went mad and attacked me? As mad as that poor white horse?"

"We had to take care of that animal of yours, of course," said Selia. "If you had appeared and all the world witnessed that oh-so-magical bond you had with my mount? It was not difficult. He was already half-mad from the Forest, and Ungolad knows ways of making an animal a little madder."

Ani struggled, and Ungolad kneed the raw scar on her back. She cried out, and he released her wrists and put a hand over her mouth. "Was I right? Is this the spot where I tickled you?" He kneed her there again, her scream muffled by his hand, a tear dropping on his first finger. She grabbed his arms and thought she might as well tug against metal bars.

"I'm telling you again," said Ungolad, "you will agree with your new mistress or you will die here."

"Enough, enough, my love." Selia stroked his chin with her finger, the expression in her eyes as soft and distant as a cat's. "She will not speak. Can you not see that she's in love with the prince?"

"But, Talone," said Ungolad.

"He does not concern me. I don't know how he escaped our notice, but he can't have proof beyond scars and a questionable testimony. It is the prince's doubt that troubles me. Ungolad, I want you to cut me."

Ani could feel him shake his head.

"Release her and cut me. I will scream, we will claim she attacked me, and the worst will be over."

"Selia, love," said Ungolad. It was the first time Ani had detected fear in his voice. "I can't cut you, I can't cut your skin."

"I'll do it," said Terne.

"Shut it, you piece of meat," said Ungolad. "You think I'd let you touch her?"

Selia pressed herself close to Ungolad, her lips at his ear. His hands began to shake. Ani could hear Selia whisper, “I’m not afraid. Be brave, my love, and our labors will be over.” She kissed his neck.

Ungolad took two panicked breaths. “All right,” he said with a growl. “I will, if we can kill her first. Then we can claim she attacked, and I was defending you.”

“Stop! Don’t touch her!”

All turned to look in the direction of the voice, toward the dais and the throne. It was empty. Ungolad’s hand pressed harder against Ani’s mouth. Selia took a step forward. The voice had come from behind them. No one was there.

An enormous tapestry behind the throne covered the far wall of the room. It had the appearance of age, of colors once vibrant that had dimmed from candle smoke and sunlight. It was unremarkable—a traditional scene of some dead king at the hunt on a once dark steed, the white, slender-antlered hart fleeing, hounds with long snouts and gold collars fast at its hooves—unremarkable, but that its center was fluttering like the breast of a bird.

Its edge lifted and Geric burst forth. The king followed, and then the king’s guard. Ani heard Ungolad curse and Selia gasp. Ani felt like gasping herself.

Geric’s eyes searched the room wildly, stopping when he saw Ani, Ungolad’s hand over her mouth and knife at her throat. He shouted in rage, drew his sword, and rushed forward.

“Get back!” Ungolad pulled Ani tighter and turned the dagger threateningly.

Geric halted and took a step back to show he would not provoke Ungolad, but he did not sheathe his sword. The king’s guard stood around him with ready swords. The Kildenreans drew theirs as well.

“Don’t be fools,” said Geric. “You hurt her and your lives are forfeit.”

The door at the head of the room opened and soldiers with the royal insignia on their shields filed into the chamber and took position. Ani knew there were more waiting in the corridor, though she could not see them. She did not stop to realize how she knew.

“Let her go,” said Geric. “Isi, are you all right?”

She looked at him beseechingly and felt Ungolad squeeze his hand as though he could crack her jaw. A small note of pain escaped her throat.

“Easy, Ungolad,” said Geric, raising his shield arm in peace. “Let’s talk. What do you want to let the princess go?”

“You are mistaken,” said Selia, her voice shaking. “She is my lady-in-waiting. This is all a joke. I’m the princess.”

The king shook his head sadly and descended the steps closer to Selia. “We heard your entire conversation, I’m afraid, so let’s skip the declarations of innocence and move on to bargaining, shall we?” She stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. He smiled back and motioned to the tapestry behind him.

“Clever opening back there, is it not, my girl? Years ago, before this estate was generously and unwillingly turned over to the crown, the lord here was a genuine dimwit. He had a minister stashed behind his throne to whisper clever things to say. I’d forgotten about it until now, but Geric used to play there as a boy and he brought it to my attention as soon as we left you.”

The king glanced at his son. Geric kept his eyes on Ungolad and tightened the grip on his sword.

“He is a good boy, always was a better judge of character than me. It was his idea to make you think you were alone and employ the listening portal. I guess he thought I was too stubborn to believe this girl’s story unless he arranged for me to hear you all admit it yourselves, and I suppose he was right.”

The king smiled fondly at Selia and reached out a hand to her. She took a step back.

“I think you know I never wish to harm a lady,” said the king. “Your own hands have spilt no blood, I think. Tell your lover there to release the princess and we’ll judge you all fairly.”

For several moments no one spoke. The tension was as tight as the stones in the walls, as stifling as the heat and closeness. Ungolad’s hand was sweating against Ani’s skin. His shield on his left arm pressed against her back. His sword hung at his side. She knew he yearned to feel his blade break her skin, to stop her breathing and her heart that beat through her back against his own chest, but that her life was the only coin in his hand.

Geric glanced at the king, at the soldiers around him, at the Kildenreans. No one moved. He reached out his hand to Ani. Ungolad took half a step backward.

“Easy there, sir,” said Geric as though he spoke to a wild horse. “Just lower your knife and let her come to me.”

“Ungolad,” said Selia. Her voice was raw with fear, and Ungolad stiffened at her command.

“Come here,” he said, “all of you!”

There was an echo of boot steps that made Ani’s skin shiver as Selia and the Kildenreans took position behind Ungolad and his hostage. Geric and some of the guards stepped forward.

“I will kill her,” said Ungolad. “Believe I will.” His hand shook at Ani’s throat. Geric halted.

“Ungolad,” said Geric, “this is the time for negotiations, not for fighting. If you start fighting, you all die. If you kill her, you all die. Let her go and I guarantee none of you will be executed.”

“We take her with us,” said Selia. “That will be our guarantee.”

“We can discuss that,” said the king.

Ani’s eyes widened in panic. She was certain that if the Kildenreans used her life to make their escape, they would kill her once they had. Geric saw Ani’s reaction and seemed to understand its meaning.

“No,” he said. “No, that’s not possible. Settle this now, in this room.”

“If we can’t leave with her as our assurance of safety,” said Selia, “then there will be nothing to settle.”

There were soldiers in the chamber and soldiers in the corridor. Ani blinked hard and swallowed against the knife. Soldiers in the corridor. She knew that because something had told her, something had touched her and carried the image of those men in perfect lines, javelins in hand, waiting for entrance, their muscles tight and anxious. A breeze from the open door.

“Tell them to back away, Crown Princess. Tell them to let us pass, and once we’re on our way we will send you back.” Selia’s voice quavered with too many tones, confusing the roles she played—commanding, regal, humble, coercive, friendly, and under it all the hate and jealousy that shook her bones when she spoke Ani’s title. Ani concentrated on turning the voice, her words that had always struck like javelins and pinned down her mind with their commands, turning those shooting words into feathers, floating away. Her eyes were closed. She was listening for any breeze, any movement of air on her skin. *Please*, she prayed, *please come*.

“Tell them,” said Selia.

A trickle of air, a cool corridor draft, brushed her brow. Selia tapped Ungolad, and he loosened the fingers on Ani's mouth so she could tell them to back away.

"No," said Ani.

The breeze pulled with it more breezes, and they circled her ankles. The air stirred around her legs, and the breeze pulled that movement into itself. She felt a draft from the high walls and beckoned it near, and a new breeze from the door that pulled in a wind from the out-of-doors on its tail, and they all merged at her feet and rustled her hem.

The room was still as they watched her gather wind. Geric watched her face, his lips parted in awe.

Quickly the wind climbed, circling her hips and waist, pushing itself between her body and Ungolad's arms and attempting to press his blade away from her throat. His hold on her tightened, and the blade slid just a little across her skin.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he said, his voice edged with terror.

That new source of wind touched the back of her head. Ani beckoned it, and it came, the very breath out of Ungolad's mouth, one long string of wind unhooked from his lungs and throat, drawn out like a snail from its shell. Breathless, he choked and stumbled, and his hold slackened. The circling wind fattened and, rising, pressed itself between his hand and her throat. As he gasped for air, Ani punched hard backward with her elbow and stepped out of his reach.

She turned to face her countrymen. The wind raised her arms at her sides and spun through her hair, beating it against the air, lifting high her locks like bright yellow flames. The Kildenreans stared at her, and some backed against the wall. She did not want to release it, the coolness on her skin, the soft touch, the shield it gave her, and the feeling at last of safety, at last that they could not touch her.

"Your war's done," said Ani.

Her hair whipped above her head. Her skirts beat around her legs with a sound like hands clapping. No one moved. They were all staring at her.

"Undone," said Selia, as if the word were a mournful song.

It all happened in a moment. Ungolad growled, his voice touching every corner of the chamber. He raised his sword and ran to Ani, hacking down at her neck. The blade was caught and slowed by Ani's twisting, invisible armor, and she had a moment to turn away from his stroke. His sword came

down hard on the stone floor. Ani swung around to face him again. She held the winds circling her body and searched the room for more, but his blow had disrupted and loosed some. The Bayern soldiers stood as if bewitched, watching the strange wind, their sword tips resting on the ground. She saw Ungolad's eyes. He would strike again.

"Geric," she said, and turned to see him already advancing, shouting a warrior's cry as he ran. But he was too far away. Ungolad ignored him and raised his sword again.

"Ungolad!"

Ungolad stopped his stroke at the familiar voice. He turned and looked. Talone stood in the doorway, the swords of soldiers pointed at his chest and the soldiers looking to the king for sign of what to do.

Talone, red faced and sweating, shouted as though over a great din, though the hall was quiet, the soldiers confused. He banged his sword on his shield and shouted, desperate to keep Ungolad's attention. "Come on, you mercenary, you coward, you slayer of cook-men and women without weapon. Fight me! Fight me!"

Ungolad's snarl changed to a smile, and his eyes betrayed a loss and a madness that Ani had never before seen. He rushed to his former captain, and the guards released Talone to meet Ungolad's strike with his own sword. Behind them, struggling through the crowded corridor came the workers, lifting crooks and staffs and shouting, "For her! For the yellow lady! For the princess!"

The shout broke the silence. The soldiers raised weapons and the Kildenreans charged, hacking their blades at any who stood near them, hoping to cut down others before they were cut down themselves. Instantly battle was engaged. Every Kildenrean fought, and for every Bayern two more soldiers stood at his back. Terne killed his soldier and met Ani's eyes. He advanced, his anger and desperation pushed before him like a hot breath. He knocked aside one soldier with his shield arm, and he pointed his sword at Ani. Her skirts were still now. Her wind had dissipated into a coolness on her face. She backed away and stumbled against the dais steps. She looked around her for a weapon and found none. And then Geric was there.

"I will have you, little prince," said Terne.

Geric raised his sword against Terne's attack. Terne leapt forward and then stopped, his eyes suddenly like a fish's, dim and shallow. He fell

forward from the impact of the javelin in his back. Ani blinked. Razo stood several paces behind him, his arm still outstretched with the throw, a look of wonder and horror heavy on his young face.

Geric pulled Ani to her feet and put his shield arm around her protectively. They were in the midst of battle. On all sides sounded the deadly rings of sword on sword, the dull thuds as javelins met flesh, the eerie echoes of groans, and the grim noise a weapon makes when it breaks skin and cracks bones. A Kildenrean rushed toward them with sword flashing. Geric parried his blows and kicked him away, backing Ani toward the wall.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes."

He held her closer and pressed his cheek against her head. She closed her eyes briefly at the comfort of his touch, her heart warming at the feel of his exhale on her brow.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes again to look over the scene. Everywhere, Kildenreans sprawled motionless on the floor. Hul lay in a heap, his head bowed over his death wound. Redmon and Uril were lifeless bodies at the feet of the king's soldiers. But several combats still raged, and the sight of one of these dried the exclamation on Ani's tongue. She pressed Geric's arm and pointed.

In the center of the room, Talone barely met Ungolad's onslaught. He was on his knees, defending with shield and sword, being pushed down to the ground. He grabbed Ungolad and held him close, their swords locked. Talone's sword gave a little, and Ungolad's blade entered his shoulder. Ungolad withdrew it, bright with Talone's blood, and shouted a laugh.

"Here!" said Geric. The prince ran to Ungolad, hoping to distract him with a new enemy before he could finish the job of death. "Here, I will fight you."

Ungolad nodded. "Yes, you. You would have touched Selia. You would have shared her bed." Ungolad's face became serious. Without seeming to move, he swept his blade before him. Geric was there with his own blade, and the two met with a clash like a bell to battle. The prince was taller than Ungolad and nearly as broad, but Ani thought it likely that Geric's swordplay had never left the training fields, while Ungolad was an experienced killer.

Ani looked to make certain that Talone was out of danger. Two soldiers near him had taken hold of his shoulders and legs and carried him from the room. None stepped forward to aid the prince in his fight against Ungolad, so Ani grabbed a javelin from a fallen guard and prepared to join the fray. Two pairs of hands grabbed her shoulders and stopped her short. She protested and turned to see two of the king's guards. They pulled her back against the wall.

"Princess Anidori," said one, "you'll stay with us. The king wants you safe."

"But, Geric. Why do you all stand still and let that traitor fight him?"

The older of the two shook his head. "It's the prince's battle and his first. It's his honor, and I won't interfere."

The cacophony of many battles died out, leaving only one. The bodies of Kildenreans were scattered across the floor. The soldiers of Bayern stepped back toward the walls, creating an open circle in the center of the room like a stage. Ungolad did not look around to see his fallen comrades. His eyes never left Geric's, and he swung his sword with strength and confidence, pushing Geric back and down, down, the broad man standing over him and striking again, again, again. They locked swords, and Ungolad curled back his lips in an animal grin and spat in the prince's face.

"I fight a boy," said Ungolad. "She would never love a boy." Spittle dripped off his lip.

The soldier holding Ani groaned. The room was breathless. The king, his brow wet and his sword tip dripping blood, took one step forward and hesitated. Ungolad pressed, and Geric was pushed to his knees, their arms shaking, their faces sweating with exhaustion and pain. Ungolad raised his shield arm and struck Geric in the head. He fell back.

Ungolad pulled back his sword for a deathblow.

"Honor," whispered Ani.

Wrapped around her hand and wrist were every breeze and draft, every movement of air that had touched her since Geric had left her side, and she begged of it now a new course, quick and sure. A bolt of wind like a dull arrow thumped Ungolad in his chest. He stumbled backward and, shifting his eyes, saw Ani and cursed. Geric had time to stand and shake his vision straight before Ungolad was on him again. He blocked with his sword and pushed Ungolad back. The next time, his sword was too slow and he blocked a strike with his shield. Ungolad's shield hand suddenly held a

dagger, and he stuck it in Geric's side. Geric cried out and kicked Ungolad away, and the dagger pulled free from Ungolad's grasp and fell clanging across the floor. Geric grimaced and advanced again.

There was power behind Geric's strike now, as though the wound gave him strength, and the fight became as real as the pain. He was on the attack, pushing Ungolad onto the dais. Ungolad defended with his shield, and when his shield dented, Geric's sword slipped down it to bloody his fist. They locked swords, and Geric kneed Ungolad in the belly. Ungolad lost his balace and stumbled backward against the dais steps, falling against the seat of the throne. Their swords locked again. With a shove Geric sent Ungolad's sword slipping down his own with a painful peal of metal. Geric shook off Ungolad's sword, found an opening, and then pierced Ungolad's leather jerkin clean through.

Ungolad sat heavily in the throne. His sword dropped to the ground with a cry that echoed in the corners of stone. He looked around wildly.

"Selia," said Ungolad.

His hand found the wound in his middle. He held it there, and the blood slipped through the cracks between his fingers. He looked up as if he saw Selia standing there before him, and he held up his red hand, showing her the death blood, showing her the color of his heart, a final pledge. He slumped and died.

Chapter 22

Geric sat on the dais steps and let his sword and shield drop. The echo was dimmer than Ungolad's had been, the noise finding not bare walls but snuffed out by a room full of people. The king put a hand on his shoulder.

"Stand up, son."

The king picked up a misshot javelin that lay on the floor, brought it down hard on his knee with a loud snap and once again to break it clean through. He dropped the pieces at Geric's feet.

"Sword," said the king.

Geric held out his sword, the tip murky with blood. A soldier at the king's right cleaned it on his own tunic and handed it to the king.

"I give it back to you to wear in defense of your people and your land and your sovereign. May it be quick and thick with the blood of your foes."

Enna came to Ani's side. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It was his first kill," said Enna. "A javelin bonds a boy to a community. A sword makes him a man."

"I think he was already a man," said Ani, rubbing her tired eyes.

The other workers stood near Enna. When the fighting ceased, they had gathered behind Ani. She looked at them now. Razo was stunned and tired, his thoughts seemingly caught in that moment when he had fired a javelin at Terne's back. Ratger had a scratch on one cheek, and Offo held a hand to his arm where there was a little blood. They had all chosen to not merely make an entrance, but throw themselves into the fight.

"This's a grim sight." Enna looked about the room, bodies slumped and crumpled, their bleeding stopped by stones and carpets.

"Where's Selia?" said Ani.

The king heard her and looked around. Geric sheathed his sword at his side and stood ready, a hand at his bleeding side. Razo grumbled, "Oh, that's just perfect."

"How did you let that murderess escape?" The king's voice trembled with anger.

"Through the secret door," said Ani. She remembered now, the draft that she had used as an arrow against Ungolad. It had carried images of cool

stone and musty cloth and anger and a girl in yellow.

"First body," said the soldier at the king's side, "search the estate. Second body, secure the wall. Third body, inform the gate guards and then report to me. Go."

Soldiers in ordered groups ran from the room, and the sounds of their boots running in the corridors bled through the stone walls.

"Sly little cat," said the king. "She knows the punishment for treason. She named it herself."

"She'll be found, sire," said a soldier. He paced to the chamber door and stood waiting for the first report.

"Get that thing out of my chair," said the king. Two soldiers removed Ungolad's body from the throne and wiped off the blood with a tunic torn from one of the fallen. The king sat down, his elbows on the rests, his head in his hands.

"Sire," said Geric.

The king waved him toward the door. "Go on, son, you're not doing me any good by bleeding."

A gray-haired soldier held a white handkerchief swiftly turning red to Geric's side. He bade him lean upon him, and together they walked across the chamber. Ani watched him, wondering, *Will he come to me now? Should I go to him?* She hesitated, and Geric left the room, his eyes on the ground. *Later*, she thought. She hoped.

Servants were gathering fallen swords and javelins in their arms like wood for a bonfire. Ani took a breath and approached the king and tried to avoid looking again at the bodies that lay at her feet and made her eyes itch and the room tip unpleasantly. Already estate workers were dragging away the bodies and rolling up blood-spotted carpets. Ani was feeling rolled up and blood spotted herself, but her friends stood at her back.

"Sire." She spoke again in the Bayern accent, having found that it felt most natural. "I've a bold request."

The king looked at her without raising his head. "It would seem, my dear, that you're in a good position for making bold requests."

"There're men in my company who'd like to receive their javelin and shield. I ask for them, and also mercy for Ratger, who left his post at your gates to come with us on this errand."

"All those boys?" said the king.

“Yes, Razo here slew Terne before he could slay me, and Offo and Beier and Conrad . . . Where’s Conrad?”

“Conrad?” said Enna.

The workers looked from one to another, bewildered. “He was with us,” said Razo.

With dread they looked through the bodies for sight of Conrad’s orange cap, freckled face, and boyish hands. Among the Kildenreans there were three Bayern soldiers, but not Conrad.

Someone screamed. Ani looked behind the throne. The tapestry thumped, and a high voice shouted curses.

“Lift it aside,” said the king. Two soldiers jumped to the task, unveiling Conrad standing in the portal, his hands full of pale hair. Behind him, prostrate on the ground, he dragged Selia. His hands were bleeding from her fingernails and his face was red from exertion, but his eyes met those of his friends and suggested a glimmer of humor.

“Look what I found,” he said. “The pretender yellow girl, though she’s not so yellow as ours now that I get a look at her. But she scratches like a cat.”

The soldiers were upon her and in moments had her standing with her arms pinned behind her back. Conrad released her hair and put his hands to his mouth, nursing the scratches. Ungolad’s body was one of the few still in the room. It lay near Selia’s feet, partially covered by a stained rug. She glanced at it, then returned her gaze to the king, no recognition registering on her face.

“Let me loose,” said Selia. Her voice sounded falsely sweet and tight with anger. “Let me loose, sire, I promise I will leave. You don’t want to kill a lady. I’m a lady.”

The king wrinkled his brow and sighed. “You may save your breath, lady. The crime of treason has been named, and the punishment you yourself have specified.”

Selia looked at the king, panic alive in her eyes, and she stomped and screamed as though even then the barrel-held nails pierced her skin. Her face contorted red and purple, and she thrashed against the soldiers’ holds.

“Enough,” said the king, his hands covering his ears. “We’ll talk of this later. I want this child out of my hearing.” The king gestured, and the soldiers carried her from the room, spitting and swearing vengeance. She did not meet Ani’s eyes.

Selia's howl faded down the corridor and all were quiet, listening, until Enna snorted and said, "And a meow to you, too."

"Did you see that I caught her, Enna?" said Conrad. He dabbed a bleeding scratch against his tunic and smiled with pride. "By her hair and all. I saw her sneaking away, and I thought, That's the one what tried to kill our goose girl, and there'll be no more of that. So I ran after her and found her trying to get through a window."

"Sire," said Ani, "this is the goose boy, Conrad."

Conrad stuck out his hand to shake, then dropped it and bowed gawkily.

"She's the real yellow lady," he said, pointing at Ani, "and I'm sorry I ever thought otherwise."

A draft left Ani's hand and nudged Conrad's cap off his head. He looked at her with mild panic, and she grinned. "Nicely done, Conrad."



They were each escorted to a room with, to Ani's delight, a real mattress and enough pillows to make her body forget the cruel slats of her hard little bed in the west settlement.

When morning declared its fullness in Ani's east window, she rose and bathed and sat in a much too comfortable chair with her back to the light, letting its heat dry her just washed hair and sipping from an endless pitcher of iced grape juice. She was just thinking about skulking down the corridor in search of the others when her door was rapped and opened by Enna.

"May I enter?" she said.

"Enna, you're not going to get formal on me now. Last night Ratger bowed to me, and Razo asked my leave to depart to his room."

"At least Conrad'll never bow," said Enna, sitting beside Ani. "I've never seen him so content as he was last night, bleeding hands and all. He almost looked smug."

Ani smiled. "Keeping geese was too dull for him. He'd make a fine peace-keeper."

"Yes, I think he'd stay in the city, unlike Finn and some of the others whose faces seem full of the Forest."

"Oh, Finn'll never leave the Forest, especially not if he could accompany a certain lady there."

Enna smiled and stretched her feet to reach a spot where a sunbeam warmed the floor. She cleared her throat before speaking. “Isi, you’ve spoken to the prince? To Geric?”

“He . . . I . . . no.” Ani sighed. “He’s stashed in a sickroom somewhere, getting that dagger wound tended, and I was afraid to ask to see him in case, you know, in case he didn’t really want me to.”

“Of course he does,” said Enna.

“Well, I don’t know, we were friends, but there were lies between us, and what if he was happy he was going to marry Selia?”

“Not likely,” said Enna.

That was just the response Ani had hoped for, though she was uncertain if it was true. She poured grape juice for Enna into a white cup. The juice sliding against the sides of the cup looked like thick blood against pale skin. Ani shivered.

“What a day it was,” she said.

“Yes,” said Enna. “Do you think they’ll really stick that Selia into a barrel studded with nails?”

“I do. I think they will. We’ve seen them hang traitors and murderers up on the walls, and she’s both. I don’t know what to think of it, Enna. I don’t know how to feel. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, But she’s a friend. And then I remember, no, no she’s not, she never was. She really did kill. She really would’ve started a war so that she could wear rubies on her brow.”

“Have you seen Talone?”

“I tried. They won’t let me go to him, saying that he’s fine and resting and doesn’t need overconcerned friends bothering him out of his sleep.”

“But you worry still,” said Enna.

“I want to see him well. I can’t get certain images to rest easy in my mind, and one of those is Talone, and Ungolad’s sword is in him, and he’s on the ground.” Ani shook her head.

“It was a horrible day,” said Enna. “I’ve never seen such things and don’t care to. Maybe I never should’ve come inside, but all I could think of was getting to you. I was horror-struck just thinking that you were alone again, and after all I’d promised.”

“Thank you,” said Ani. She fingered Enna’s thick locks. They were as smooth as wet clay between her fingers. “I always wanted black hair. I thought it was exotic.”

Enna laughed. “Now you’re the exotic one, with your hair longer than a horse’s tail and yellow, even.”

A knock sounded, and Ani jumped up to admit a prim little man in shiny boots who called her to the king.

“I’d hoped to see my friend,” she said. “Talone, who’s wounded. Last night the physician sent me away to let him rest.”

“I hear your friend’s in no danger. The king’s call’ll be heeded first.”

Ani shot Enna a look of lighthearted terror and followed the man out.

He introduced her into the conference room, a small but brightly lit space. The air was tense. Several men sitting at a great wood table covered with maps and letters rose as she entered. Geric’s face was flushed, as though he had been shouting before her arrival, but she was relieved to see him sitting up and looking well. The prime minister’s face barely buried a glower. The king motioned for her to be seated.

“Good morning, my dear,” said the king. “We’re sorry to have neglected you so long and to greet you now with the grim details of a war meeting in place of a banquet and procession. All in its course.” He cleared his throat, and his expression seemed unsure, but when he spoke again the words bore all the power of the throne. “We beg you to give us reason to believe there’s no war preparing in Kildenree.”

Ani’s head bent back slightly, as though pushed by the king’s words.

“I don’t understand, sire.” Ani swallowed a laugh. “You’re still contemplating war?”

“Unless you can give us evidence.”

“Evidence? Of what? Of peace? Teach me how to give evidence of peace and I will.” She paused to check her anger. The men still stared. “You must know that Kildenree will not attack Bayern.”

The prime minister rose, exuding authority with one exact gesture of his hand. “This, my dear, is evidence.” He picked up several papers before him. “Letters given to us by the Princess Anidori-Kiladra, or this Selia, if you will. They’re written and signed by the queen of Kildenree and detail inimical intentions, with dates, numbers, places, all stamped with the royal insignia.”

Ani grabbed a parchment and had to absorb its aspect for only a moment before understanding. “This isn’t my mother’s hand. Forgery. Selia’s mother is the key-mistress of the palace, a woman with access. She might have found a way to steal my mother’s crest ring to make the seals.”

The prime minister glanced at the king's thoughtful face and turned back to Ani with new ardor. "Evidence. Show evidence and we'll believe. It's another ploy, Your Highness, to keep us unwitting and unprepared while our enemies move to crush us in our sleep."

"Oh, stop it." Ani covered her face in her hands and breathed in the momentary darkness. She dropped them and stood up, anger prickling her fingertips. "This is ridiculous. You want evidence? History will show you that Kildenree hasn't warred with any of its neighbors in over three hundred years. Numbers will prove that Kildenree is far too small to attack a kingdom like Bayern. And the girl who gave you the only evidence you have to the contrary is a fraud, a deceiver, and a murderer. You should already know these facts.

"But in a country where you hang your dead up on walls and pride whether or not a man bears a javelin more than his character, how am I to persuade you out of a war? It would be suicide for Kildenree to war on Bayern and butchery for Bayern to attack Kildenree. If you don't believe me, then send me back. Or if you don't trust me to leave, I'll return to my little room on the west wall and tend your geese, and you can be sure that on my watch no thieves will touch my flock."

Ani walked to the door but stopped and turned around. "Did you know that there're workers in your city who aren't allowed into shops and taverns because they're from the Forest and therefore don't hold a javelin? And men who call themselves peace-keepers, obeying their own code of law and not the king's, sworn to keep the streets safe because the king's soldiers do not or will not? And areas so crowded that children live on the refuse of others?"

While the prime minister's look remained indignant, Geric's eyebrows raised and the king looked up from his study of his hands.

"I see from your faces that you don't think much about these things. Maybe I know more about your city than you do, and I certainly know more of Kildenree. Believe me, there is no war. If you want evidence, explain why a mother would send her first daughter into her enemy's camp. I'll be your evidence." She shut the door behind her.



An hour later, Geric found her sitting on the steps to the kitchen in the shade of the tallest chimney. Her anger had worn down into a righteous indignation that was fraying into embarrassment when she saw his approach. She knew it was Geric from a distance, and she felt spots of heat on her cheeks. She covered her face with her fingers. He smiled at her, and there was real humor in the lines of his smile. He sat beside her and after a moment released a short laugh.

"That was something," he said. "I've never seen anyone make the king and his entire council feel like utter fools."

"They listened?" she said.

"Oh, yes, thoroughly. You, my lady, have just stopped an unnecessary war." He looked down and swallowed. "May I beg your pardon? I've behaved so badly to you, and I've been aching to explain."

"Is this about the 'I can't love you as a man loves a woman' bit?"

Geric grimaced. "Ah-ha, yes, that's the very line. I, you see, I noticed that last day in the goose pasture that I'd begun to—feel—something about you that I shouldn't, as I was betrothed and all, and I thought it best if I just stopped seeing you altogether. I was feeling rather terrible for betraying your sentiments, besides having lied to you about who I was. But then when I saw you yesterday, well, maybe you can imagine that I haven't had a steady heartbeat since you walked into the throne room."

Just then, Ani could feel her own heartbeat pounding against her ribs.

"I wish I had known somehow who you were and set things right," said Geric, "and spared you the horrors of yesterday. When I walked in and saw that man holding you with a knife to your throat . . ."

He shut his eyes as though against the image. Ani had an impulse to kiss his eyelids but quickly spoke instead.

"How's your . . ." She pointed to his side.

Geric opened his eyes, looked to see what Ani was indicating, and put a hand over his side. "Bandaged. Pulsing with my heart like the wound is a living thing, but certainly healing. Thank you."

"I want to thank you for stepping in to save Talone," said Ani.

"He seems to be a noble man and a fine soldier."

"Yes, he's been more than good to me. It was a relief for us to find each other after the massacre and not feel alone."

"You spoke with fire about him there before my father, and he risked a lot to see you safe." He looked at her, and the clarity of his dark eyes struck

her heart with a sensation of a wound touched. “Does he care for you?”

“I’m sure of it,” she said. “He’s been more than good to me.”

A wrinkle formed between his eyes. “Is it possible that Talone might ask your hand, and that you might want to give it?”

“Oh, no, he won’t, I mean, I don’t. He’s as dear as a father, and I’m the child he protects, that’s all.”

“Oh,” said Geric with a soft exhale. He examined the hilt of his sword, and his lips appeared to fight a smile. “We’ve been friends, Isi, and I feel I know you, but I don’t want to presume anything anymore. This marriage was arranged without your consent, and if you have any hesitation about me, I will understand.”

She took his hand. “When Ungolad fought you, it was horrible, Geric, and I thought, if he won, I wouldn’t be able to bear it. I’ve missed you these months.”

Geric breathed out as though he had been holding his breath, and he grinned with relief. Ani could not help grinning back, and they laughed lightly at nothing. He looked down at her hand and turned it palm up, running his fingers over the creases and merging his fingers with hers. She leaned her head against his shoulder with a familiarity that surprised her.

“You were amazing in there,” said Geric. “You were—I can scarcely believe how lucky I am. Growing up, I tried to imagine what my mysterious betrothed princess would be like, and I’d think, I hope she’s clever, and I hope we have things to say to each other, and I wouldn’t cry if she was a beauty as well. But I never imagined that I could marry a girl who was all those things and knew Bayern’s needs better than I, who would truly be a partner on the throne. What this kingdom sorely misses is a queen, and you are exactly what they, and I, what we all need.”

Her stomach tingled pleasantly. “Am I really?”

“You are everything and more, Isi.”

“I’d like to be.”

“Then,” said Geric, his brow wrinkling, his voice anxious and tender, “will you have me?”

“Yes.” She smiled and laughed. “Yes, of course, yes.”

He smiled slowly and broadly. “I say good. Good and good. I was afraid I’d lost you forever after I wrote you that note, and when I saw you at wintermoon, well, you know I felt as though I’d had a dart thrown into my heart. I think that Selia could tell, and she didn’t like it one bit.”

“Nor did I.”

“So much has happened since we last spoke, what with secret identities and a horde of animal-keepers shouting your name, and what about that, that wind? You’ve a story I want to hear, goose girl.”

“And you have things to tell me, Sir Guard.”

“Well then, the first thing I would like to tell you, my lady, and I’d better tell it quickly because my heart is likely to break through my rib cage any moment, the first thing is that I love you. And the second thing is that, as much as I honor your former profession, I don’t think your geese care much for your betrothed, and I hope they hadn’t any plans on sharing our bed.”

“Oh, but think what use they’d be,” said Ani. “They’d encourage snooping maids to stay away from our bedroom, and on particularly busy days we could stick hats on them and let them receive some of our supplicants.”

“Ah, yes, excellent point.”

He smiled, and all signs of worry disappeared from his face. With happy enthusiasm, he stood up, his hand on his sword hilt, and shouted, “I, Geric-Sinath of Gerhard, declare right now that you’re beautiful and you’re perfect and I’ll slay any man who tries to take you from my side. Goose girl, may I kiss you?”

She answered by standing and kissing him first and held his cheeks and closed her eyes and felt sure as bones and deep as blood that she had found her place.

Their embrace was interrupted by a young page clearing his throat. Ani looked down, but Geric did not seem embarrassed at all.

“Are they ready?” he said as though he had been expecting the interruption.

The pageboy nodded and bade them follow, taking two steps for their every one like a short-legged dog. He stopped before the door to the dining hall, his hand gesturing that they should enter. Geric was grinning madly.

“What is it?” said Ani.

“You’ll see.”

The doors opened.

“Welcome, daughter,” said the king.

There was a kind of silence in the room because no one spoke, but a silence that betrayed the truth of one hundred hearts beating, one hundred mouths breathing, one hundred hands that held themselves, fisted, before

their chests. The king's guard and the captains of the royal army and of every hundred-band stood at attention, their fists showing loyalty, their heads inclined respectfully.

"Captains," said Geric, "Princess Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, first daughter of Kildenree, she who ended our war before the javelin was thrown."

The captains banged their javelins against the ground.

"Oh, my," said Ani.

"We're supposed to walk among them," said Geric.

She placed her hand on his forearm and they walked past the lines, and Ani noticed with relief that there were mostly the signs of gratitude in their eyes and not the bitterness she had feared for this girl who had stopped their war.

In the center of the room, between two groups of worn and experienced captains of hundred-bands, stood a strange group of soldiers. They held javelins firmly in right hands, and on their arms hung freshly painted shields bearing the images of two trees—one green and one yellow.

They looked forward with proud and stoic expressions, but Finn smiled so broadly that his lips slid tight to show his teeth, and he looked at Ani and grinned wider. Razo stared ahead, his eyes unblinking, and cried freely. Offo was solemn, but his javelin trembled in his hand. Ratger stood by also, his palace guard tunic worn openly, and Conrad's calmness was betrayed by a slim smile. Enna and the other girls stood at their far end, each holding a larger shield in both hands.

"We're debating between calling ourselves the Forest-band or the yellow-band," said Enna. "What do you think?"

Geric and Ani spoke over each other. "The yellow-band, definitely," he said.

"Oh, the Forest-band, for pity's sake," she said.

They strolled through the rows of captains and bade them relax, and the presentation became a supper. Talone left his sickbed to sit at Ani's right for a while, and they drank to his health. After a drink he showed some vigor and related the story of when he had first met Ani, a child asleep on the shore of the swan pond who had tried to run away.

The captains ate and laughed and traded stories with Geric, so content as to never leave. One taught Razo how to throw a javelin straight and far, one taught Enna the song of a tale she had never heard. Ani tried to teach them

all how to greet several different species of birds in their own tongue, and they clicked and trumpeted and moaned in their throats until they thought they could never stop laughing. The hours stretched out and the kitchen-hands brought new trays of hot food and then, at Geric's insistence, the kitchen-hands stayed and ate as well. The light from the windows faded to the pulsing blue of evening, and no one left.

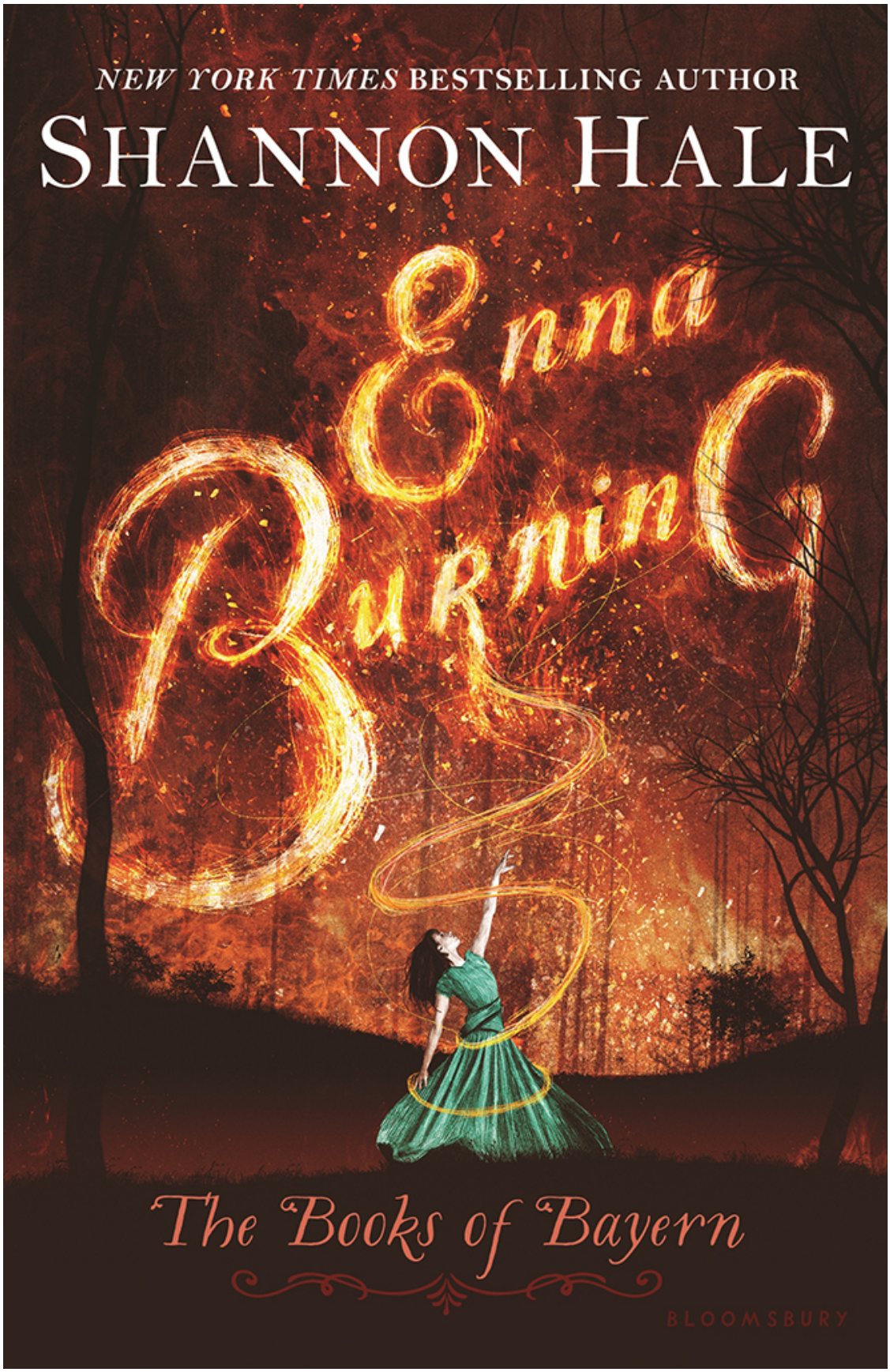
There was no hurry. There would be time for the captains to announce to their troops the end of the unfought war and bid them all home with their wives. There would be time to return to the workers' settlements in the city and see them all with javelins and shields, and to see Talone, healed and well, commanding a hundred-band of the king's own. And a wedding in the market-square in the Thumbprint of the Gods where the javelin dancers came at festivals and where all could witness, noble and city-dweller and Forest dweller alike, the marriage of their future king and queen. Gilsa, too, there and at last rewarded.

There would be time to take down the white horse head from the west gate and have a burial, belated and quiet, Falada laid to rest under the beech tree by the goose pond, and over that spot a monument laid, a carving in white stone of a colt and a girl seemingly too young for such adventures so far from home.

And there would be time to spend in the stables in late spring, befriending the loose-gaited stable-master and aiding a mare to foal. And when the colt, nothing but a bundle of legs and wet fur as black as Enna's hair, fell into her arms, Ani might hear a name.

The End




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Enna Burning

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The Forest
Thick Pines, Ravines
Ostekin
Eylbold
Adelmund
Folcmar
Fedorthal
Ingridan
Unclaimed Lands
Stony Ground, Bogs
Suneast River
Tira
Grasslands, Plains
Rosewood
Sea
Quapah
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Prologue



The woman bore a scorch mark from her chin to her brow. The vision in her left eye was still blurry, as though she were looking through a scratched pane. She had been walking away from the burning for a few weeks by now and so supposed the eye would never heal, even if she lived long enough to give it time. Closing her bad eye, she squinted to see where she was going. There was a patch of greenness on the horizon that stretched into the east. A forest. Perhaps that would be far enough away.

As the woman walked, she leaked fire unawares, and the dead river wood occasionally smoked beside her or crackled into flame. Once or twice, to ease the burning, the woman threw herself into the stream beside her path, choking on the water and weeping as the stream took away her heat. It was hard to get back up after that, but memory of the horrors she left behind drove her on.

Her skin twitched to remember hot ash falling; her eyes roved as though watching again and again the village in flames. She clutched the sack containing the vellum tighter to her chest, remembered her purpose, and walked faster.

She walked until the wet forest air enclosed her and washed the scorched smell from her hair. She walked until she fell. Then she dug where she fell, pulling away handfuls of soil from under a young fir tree.

“Here,” she said, talking to the fir, “keep this.”

The woman unrolled the oiled cloth and took out the vellum, looking again at the writing that had started the end of her everything. It was still in beautiful condition, though the vellum had been made from lambskin in her mother’s time. Tight, delicate writing filled its face, each black stroke bleeding tiny lines thin as spiders’ legs, each word stitched together in a lacework of ink. Glancing over it again, she sobbed once at the beauty of the knowledge it held. Her eyes stung, and the fever burned away any tears.

She loved the fire, loved it more than her own flesh now. Destroying the vellum and the truth it held seemed a hopeless gesture. Deep inside, behind her scorched eye, she knew she probably should. But no, she would hide it to prevent destruction like the kind she had caused. And she would hide it so that perhaps one day someone with the talent to learn could read it and know its goodness. She prayed it might be someone stronger than she.

She wrapped the vellum back in its cloth, then slipped both into the slim clay pot she had used for water, burying the tiny coffin beneath the pine.

The woman lay down and let herself relax, deep inside, where for so long she had trembled to hold the fire at bay. Her control broke like a tree limb under too much weight, and the snap made her cry out. Heat poured from her chest and pressed out against her skin, burning her as she had burned others. Her blurred eye went dark, her good eye saw gold, and the forest pulsed with life, then stilled under a winding breeze.

She rested her head on the ground. The pine needles pressing into her cheek began to crackle. Smoke rose in fragile tendrils, and she watched them rise until she could at last give in fully and die.

Part One



Sister

Chapter 1

Enna let the fire burn out.

She was not used to this duty. For the three years she had lived and worked in the city, the hearth had been the hall mistress's responsibility. And when Enna had returned to the Forest a year ago at the onset of her mother's illness, her mother had continued to tend the fire. After her mother's death in the spring, Enna had become the mistress of this little Forest house, but with a garden to tend, wood to chop, and a brother, a goat, and chickens to feed, she often forgot the fire.

It was not hard to do. A fire in a kitchen hearth was a quiet beast.

Of course, Enna thought, she *would* overlook the coals on a night when her brother and, more important, the flint in the kindling box were out wandering in the deep woods. So she walked to the house of her nearest neighbor, Doda, and borrowed a spade's worth of embers in her milking pail. She struggled home, gripping the hot handle with a rag and the end of her skirt.

The embers drew her eyes. They were beautiful, pulsing red in the bottom of the dark pail like the heart of a living thing. She looked away, and the orange coals stayed before her eyes, burning its image over the night. She tripped on a tree root.

"Ah, ah," she said, trying to regain her balance and keep the hot pail from touching her or spilling to the ground. She cursed herself for the hundredth time that night for being so careless, sought out the dark outline of her house, and headed for it.

"Strange," said Enna, blinking hard to clear her vision. There appeared to be a light in her window, and it was getting brighter. Enna ran through the yard and looked into the open window.

First she noticed the hearth fire blazing. She was about to exclaim when she saw her brother, Leifer, sitting beside it, his pack on his lap, his attention taken up by something in his hands. Enna thought he looked handsome like this, his face still and thoughtful. He shared with Enna the black hair and dark eyes that had marked their mother. At age eighteen he

was two years older than Enna, though unlike her he had never left the Forest even so far as to visit Bayern's capital, just two days' travel from their home.

Leifer unrolled the thing in his hands, and the firelight illuminated it from behind so that it glowed like a lamp. Enna could see it was a piece of vellum with writing on one side. Leifer could read a little, as could she—unusual for Forest-born, but their mother was from the city and had taught them. Parchment was rare in the Forest, and Enna had no notion where he had found such a thing.

A slow, burning pain in her hands reminded her what she held, and she tottered onto the porch and through the door. She caught sight of Leifer hastily rolling up the vellum and stuffing it in his pack.

"Hot," said Enna at a near run. She put the pail by the hearth and brushed off her hands. "Ow, but that rag grew thinner the farther I walked. Greatness, Leifer, I thought the house aflame from a distance."

Leifer closed up his pack and shoved it into the darkness under his bed. "Well, had you kept the fire going . . . "

"Yes, yes," said Enna, shooing away his protest with a wave of her hand. "No need to remind me I'm as good as a fish when it comes to the cookfire. Really, you're good to get a full blaze going in a dead hearth in just the time it took me to get a pail of embers from Doda. You did spook me coming up out of nowhere, though. Why're you back a day early?"

Leifer shrugged. "We were done." He looked out the window, though the night was so dark that it opened only to a view of blackness. He seemed thoughtful, but Enna would not have the silence. He had been gone for six days, and she had driven the chickens to ceaseless squawking in a vain quest for conversation.

"So," said Enna, her voice expressing exaggerated impatience, "what'd you find?"

"Oh, you know. Gebi found settling places with fresh springs about an hour's walk from here. We found another pasturing place, brought back some berry bushes and onions for planting, and . . . " He paused, then rose to close the shutters on the night. He stood a moment, his hand splayed on the wood. "And I found a lightning-dead fir in the deep Forest. We, we pulled it up by the roots, dragged it to the spring for settlers to use."

His voice hinted at more.

She cleared her throat. "And?"

“Something curious . . . ” He looked back at her, and his voice was edged with excitement. “There were some shards of pottery wrapped right up in its roots, like something, maybe a bowl or jar, had been buried there before the fir took deep root. I counted the rings, and I think the tree was near a hundred years old.”

“Hm. You find anything else?” *The vellum*, she thought. She knew if Leifer did not bring it up on his own, all the cajoling in the world could not squeeze a secret out of him. When he did not speak, she grabbed a boot and threw it at his backside.

“Ow,” he said with a laugh, and rubbed the spot.

“Why’re you so quiet?” said Enna.

Leifer snorted. “You know, Enna, you’re like a baby who needs to be constantly cuddled and cooed at.”

Scowling, she scooped up the remains of an apple-and-oat stew and shoved the bowl into his hands. “Would a baby serve you supper?”

Leifer smiled at his bowl. “Thanks,” he said.

He eyed her to see if she was actually angry, so she scowled again and ignored him for her knitting.

“I mean it,” said Leifer. “Thanks for—”

“Swallow, then talk.”

Leifer swallowed hastily. “Thanks for sticking around all year, after Ma . . . and everything. I mean it. You know . . . I can tell . . . I see how you look. You’re not always happy here.”

Enna shrugged.

“The Forest isn’t exciting for you, after living in the city, I guess.” The corners of Leifer’s mouth twitched. “Stay a while longer. I think it’ll liven up soon.”

“What, pine nut season?” Enna smirked. “You Forest boys have heads stuffed with fir needles. There are other things in this world besides trees.”

“I know.” Leifer finished his bowl and then stared at the bottom. A crease formed between his eyebrows.

“What does that look mean?” Enna asked.

“I was just remembering something Gebi told me. When he was in the city at marketday, a city butcher called him a squatter. The more I think about it, the madder I get.”

“Hmph,” said Enna, knitting more emphatically, “you never step out of the canopy’s shade, what do you care what some city butcher thinks about

you?”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed at the tight spot on his brow. “I don’t know, but it bothers me now. Our people have been living for over a hundred years on land the city folk thought was too rough. And still, they call us squatters.”

“There are some ignorant people in the city, I won’t argue that, but you know that things’re changing for us.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you go on before, and I don’t want to hear it now.”

“Well, you’re going to,” said Enna, her heart beating harder at the prospect of a good quarrel. “In the city, when I kept chickens for the king’s house, all the animal workers were Forest folk like us, living there because our parents couldn’t afford to feed us out here. Dozens of us huddled together in our animal keeper quarters, not permitted to mingle with the city folk.”

“I know, Enna, but—”

“No, you listen. You weren’t there. It was hard. Our boys couldn’t buy a drink in a tavern or court a city girl or earn a coin any other way but tending animals. We’ve got rights now. I saw with my own eyes the king bestow Forest boys with javelins and shields, just like the city boys and village boys get when they come of age. We’re citizens. Just look at how we’re clearing our own market centers and acting like proper villages.”

“But don’t you care? They call us squatters, and I’m not going to just take that.”

“Of course you will, because—”

“I’m not!” Leifer bolted out of his chair and hurled his clay bowl against the wall, shattering it to bits. Enna stood, dropping the yarn. The ball rolled until it hit his boot.

“Leifer, what . . . ?”

Leifer kicked the yarn and scowled, and for a moment Enna thought he might break something else. Then his breath heaved and his face softened.

“I’m sorry, I—” He shook his head, grabbed his pack from beneath his cot, and ran outside.

Enna followed him into the yard and watched him disappear into the night forest. “What’s the matter?” she shouted after him. “You sick or something?”

She stood a while in the yard, expecting him to mope back and apologize, but he did not return.

“Leifer?” she called again. He was gone. Enna shook her head. “Wonders.”

It was late summer. The air felt thicker at night, the darkness full of unspent action. The house stood in a clearing just big enough for the animals and the kitchen garden, and then the yard was stopped by towering evergreens—thick trunked, spiny armed, their heads blocking the view to the stars. Sometimes, especially at night, those trees felt like a wall.

She walked to the edge of the yard, leaned against a dark fir, and felt her chest stretch against that familiar feeling, that yawning bit of panic. It felt as though something were missing, but she did not know what she was mourning. Maybe Leifer was feeling the same way, that the Forest was not enough anymore, that he had to find something bigger to fill his life. But just going to the city to tend the king’s animals was not the answer now, not for either of them.

You’re not always happy here, he had said. He could *see* that. Enna wondered what had happened to the girl who was content just walking the deer paths padded with needles, her feet sticky with sap and her pockets full of pine nuts. She pressed herself against the coarse trunk and felt again how much she loved the Forest and remembered a time when she had never wanted to leave.

And then there had been the city, and her best friend, Isi, who had been an animal worker just like herself. Enna sighed homesickness, missing her friend whom she had not been able to visit since her mother took ill. Isi was wonderful. She had stopped a war, honored her friends, married her love, discovered a great power. Enna could not be content now that she had seen all Isi had done. *There could be something like that for me*, thought Enna again, *if I knew where to look.*

A hunting owl passed so close that she felt the air from his wings brush her face. Then he was gone, as he had come, in silence.

Leifer did return the next morning, though not quite apologetic enough to satisfy Enna. She found herself glaring at him regularly. The glowers did not work. Leifer’s easy laugh seemed hard to come by. Once he yelled at her over some unswept ashes.

“What’s the matter with you?” she yelled back. “Why’re you acting like an injured boar? Has this got something to do with that vellum?”

Leifer gave her such a hateful look that Enna found herself wishing for her mother. Then she grabbed a broom and pushed him out of the house.

"You can come back when you can be nice!" she shouted after him.

Enna spent the morning glad to have him gone, then bored, then so lonely that she wished he would come back and glare at her some more so she could have a nice interesting fight or at least have another try at dragging information out of him. She was thinking on Leifer and kneading bread dough so vigorously, she did not know anyone had approached until she happened to look out the window. Someone was watching her from the yard —a boy of sixteen with longish black hair, large eyes, and a mouth fixed in a pleased grin.

"Good crows, Finn, how long've you been standing there?"

He shrugged.

"Well, come in. Don't stand out there like a stranger," said Enna. "Why didn't you speak up?"

"I was just watching you." Finn set his pack on the floor, washed his hands in a water pail, and grabbed a lump of dough. "Didn't want to interrupt."

"Don't be trying to help me, Finn. Sit. You must've been walking since daybreak."

She tried to snatch the dough away from him, and he sidestepped her.

"What're going to do, wrestle it from me?"

Enna laughed. "Well, thanks, then, and good to see you, Finn. How's your mother?"

Finn nodded. "Good. I'm—we're ready early for marketday, and she said I could take a couple of days to come see you."

She said I could. Enna sometimes thought it was good for Finn to get away from his mother for a time. If not for her, undoubtedly he would have gone to live in the city with other Forest folk like herself. Through their friend Isi, he had made many friends among the animal keepers there and often went to visit when in town for marketday. Since Enna had returned to the Forest, he had become a regular guest at her house as well.

"Well, Finn, you came just in time to save me from screaming craziness. Leifer's gone mad, that's all there is to it."

Finn looked concerned. "What, he didn't hurt you?"

"Oh, no, just woke up with a case of grumpiness that would scare off any nanny goat. And I swear he's got a secret, something he found off in the

woods. What with his strangeness, I haven't spoken to a sensible person in days."

Enna peeled the dough off the table and threw it down again. "Look at me, Finn. When we met in the city two years ago, did you see me in this kind of life? Kneading this dough, living out here like my ma, tending the house and animals, and talking to myself for company? She was married at my age, but that doesn't fit me, does it, Finn?"

"Somehow, I can't think of anything you could do that would surprise me," he said. Enna pushed him playfully with her shoulder. He took a couple of off-balance steps, but she suspected he did it on purpose to make her feel tough. "What do you think you'll do?"

"About Leifer? Knock his head and listen for the hollow thunk."

"No, about you."

Enna paused. "I don't know, Finn. I need to do something." She flexed her hand and watched the sinews stretch. "I feel like I'm homesick for something, maybe for Isi and the old days in the city. When I was an animal keeper, it was hard work, but I loved the winter nights or rain days when all us Forest-born would hole up in the workers' hall, Isi and Razo and the rest, and play games and hear tales and watch the fire." She smiled. "And later, too, when stuff was happening, and we helped Isi from the louts who tried to kill her, and she married the prince. What a wedding, huh? You in fine cloth and holding a javelin and all? And the nights up in the palace when you came to visit, and Isi would have a picnic on the throne room floor and invite all the animal workers."

Finn nodded. "Times I thought I could stay there forever, and I thought you'd never leave."

"Me too, once." Enna stopped pounding the dough and watched it rise. "But later, I don't know, I felt different, like I was just a guest, you know? With all the courtiers and ladies-in-waiting and guards and everything, after a while, it didn't seem like Isi needed me anymore."

"But you had to leave, for your ma," he said.

Enna nodded. "I know, and I stayed because I thought Leifer needed me. But lately . . . it seems like all he really needs is a good kick to the head."

"I'd miss you, Enna, if you left the Forest . . . if I couldn't see you much."

"Well, thanks for that."

The ease of the moment made Enna realize just how many times they had stood together in such an exchange, Enna talking about whatever was on her mind, Finn listening. She thought that perhaps he had heard more of her thoughts than any other person. She turned to look him over. He noticed and glanced away.

"Huh, what a patient person you are, Finn," she said. "I should be more like you."

Finn shook his head. "No. If I'm patient, then you don't have to be, because one of us already is."

Enna did not argue. To Finn, the point seemed to make perfect sense.

They worked together until the house was clean and bread hot to eat, then sat outside to watch the night come on. The tree shadows merged into a general darkness, broken only by pale splatterings of moonlight. The crackle of a pinecone underfoot startled Enna upright in her chair. Leifer emerged from the Forest blackness.

"Oh," she said, leaning back. "It's just you."

He came up behind her and rested his forehead on the crown of her head.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's the first bit of sense I've heard from you in days." She hoped Leifer might be all right after all and gave a friendly tug to the back of his hair. "Say hello to Finn."

"Hello, Finn. I can barely see your face. Dark, isn't it?"

Leifer walked over to the yard fire pit, his back to them. Enna saw an orange spark, then the pit was blazing. He turned to her, his smile lit by the orange glow.

"How'd you . . . That was a fast fire," said Enna. "What did you put in there besides wood?"

Leifer ignored her question. "Finn, I'm glad you're here. I was just thinking I needed to talk to someone like me who's always been Forest blood to bones, someone who never ran off to live in the city."

"I've been in the city many times," said Finn.

Leifer waved off his comment. "Yes, to marketday, and to visit your old friend the *princess*." He hit that word with a touch of mockery that immediately put Enna on her guard. "But it's clear where your allegiance lies."

Finn glanced at Enna for a hint of how to respond, but Leifer did not give him time.

“Just listen a moment—don’t interrupt, Enna—because I’ve been thinking. We’ve done all right in the Forest, haven’t we? Now the borders of Bayern have tossed a noose around the Forest and claimed it a boon. I don’t trust them, Finn, touting their cobblestones and saddled horses and all the while enslaving Forest girls and boys.”

“Enslaving?” said Finn. “I don’t think—”

“There are others who see like we do, Finn, others who would join a fight if we decided to rebel.”

Enna felt her jaw lower in awe, and she waited for Leifer to laugh and admit he was joking. But there was a hardness in his voice she had never noted before, and he flexed and unflexed his hands as though he meant action.

“Leifer,” Enna began.

“Hush, Enna,” he said. “You know, Finn, lately I can’t stop thinking about Bayern over there, eyeing our lands and trees and using our people—and it all started with that meddling, foreign princess.”

Enna croaked a dry laugh. “Oh, you wouldn’t dare start belittling Isi with me sitting right here.”

Leifer turned his back to the fire, and she could see only the glint of one eye. His voice was thin. “I know she’s your friend, and I’m supposed to be scared of her because of the rumors she can summon birds and wind. I say there’s something bad about her, and when I get the fight going, she’ll be the first to burn.”

“Leifer!” Enna stood. “How dare you talk like that?”

“I’m talking to Finn, Enna. I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“You think I’ll stand by while you threaten the princess?” said Enna. “You know I won’t.”

“Hush, I said.” Leifer crossed to the fire and threw pinecones into its heart. They hissed and popped.

“I can’t believe what I’ve put up from you this week. Poor Finn has sat patiently through your crazy talk, but when you start mouthing off on Isi, well, you’d be half a horse not to think either one of us would knock you down flat before we’d allow you to say another word.”

“I said shut up!” Leifer turned. Enna could see his face caught up in the fire’s shivering orange glow. His shoulders and arms trembled, and his expression was so foreign, she could scarcely believe he was her brother.

“Leifer,” she said, suddenly afraid, though she did not know what she expected would happen.

Leifer grimaced as though fighting pain, then cried out. Enna felt a rush of heat and a sudden sting. She looked down to see her skirt on fire.

Enna screamed and dropped to the ground, trying to kick off the blazing skirt. Finn tore off his coat and beat at the flames. He extinguished them, and Enna lay still, breathing hard.

“Are you all right?” said Finn. He knelt beside her, his anxious hands hovering over her legs, afraid to touch them. “Enna, are you all right?”

Enna nodded, too stunned to speak. She looked up to where Leifer stood, his hands covering his mouth. Finn arose, putting himself between Enna and her brother.

“Leifer,” said Finn, like a challenge.

The fire at Leifer’s feet died down, feeding leisurely on the wood. The low yellow light lit his features from below, exaggerating the creases in his forehead and under his eyes so that he looked like a very old man. He stared at Enna, and he seemed his old self, her brother, the little boy who had put beetles in her bed, the young man who brought her a bucket of mushrooms as proudly as if he had found gold. There was a sad horror in his face as he seemed to realize what he had done.

“Enna. I’m sorry. I, I didn’t mean . . . ” He turned and ran into the trees.

“Leifer!” He did not turn back. Enna exhaled slowly and felt her chest shudder. “What just happened?”

“I didn’t see, it was so fast,” said Finn. “Do you think he’s got fire, you know, like Isi has wind, and he can control it? But why would he hurt you?”

“I don’t know.”

Finn helped Enna into the house and looked at her red ankles, humming to himself as though to ease her worry. He would not leave her alone long enough to fetch her neighbor Doda, so he himself applied soothing lard to her legs and wrapped them in clean rags. His natural calmness made the strange night and the biting pain feel easier to bear.

“I’d best stay with you for a time, make sure he doesn’t try . . . whatever it is he did.”

Enna stared at the hearth fire. “All those bedtime tales were preparing me for this. Isi once said that hearing and telling unbelievable stories make it easier to believe when strange things happen.” She found she could believe

what Leifer had done, but what frightened her was the unknown of what he would do next.

They both were silent, watching the hearth coals throb orange in the ashes. Even the sight of fire made Enna's ankles feel worse. Just then, she thought burns the cruelest wound. Enna's mother used to call the ache from cuts and bone breaks "the feeling of healing," but the burn kept on burning as though the fire were still in her skin, using her body as fuel.

A lump of blackened wood crumbled in the hearth, and a yellow flame rose higher for just a moment before pulling back inside the embers. Enna closed her eyes against it, heard Finn creaking in the rocking chair to the pulse of her blood in her wounds, and knew she could not wait for Leifer to act again. She needed help, and there was only one person to ask.

Chapter 2

Enna sent Finn home the next morning, though he protested valiantly.

"I'll be fine, Finn," she said. "Leifer won't show his face here for a time, I think. I'll ride out with Doda tomorrow for marketday, and we'll pick you up along the way."

She had saved a number of eggs in the cool root cellar, and they would fetch a better price in the city than at the Forest marketday. Though after several months' absence from the capital, she had more important reasons for wanting to return than the prospect of some extra coin. If anyone could counsel her on Leifer's situation, it was Isi.

A day later, Enna left her house for Doda's. She checked her pack to make sure she had flint and kindling, and when she looked up again, Leifer stood before her. She tried not to flinch. His clothes carried evidence of the Forest floor, the red indentation of fir needles still marking one of his cheeks.

"Been by yourself for two days?" asked Enna.

"Yes." His eyes looked haunted, wide open, like someone who has had too much sleep and awake still seems to dream.

"Da used to say, 'There're smarts in Leifer's head like there's fire in flint,'" said Enna, "'but you have to knock the flint to get to the flame.'"

Leifer bowed his head. She thought the memory might make him laugh, then was glad he did not. He had no right to laugh yet.

"I'll expect you to keep an eye on things while I'm gone," she said, "and I'd better not find any roasted chickens waiting for me."

He nodded solemnly.

She felt a bit annoyed by the lack of confrontation, and her voice hardened. "And maybe you could give me any coin you've saved so I can buy myself a new skirt."

Leifer covered his face with a hand and cried. Enna stood beside him, her hands on her hips, and felt a little more satisfied.

"I'm sorry, Enna. I swear I'll never burn you again," he said.

Enna whistled long and low. “A brother should never get to a point where he has to make that kind of a promise. ‘I’ll never burn you again.’ That’s just sad, Leifer.”

Leifer laughed ruefully.

“And where’ve you been?” she asked. “What you do with the fire—can you just get rid of it?”

“I can’t.” His voice was raspy from crying or thirst. “You don’t understand if you ask me that question. I have to use it.”

“Why?”

“I can’t . . . ”

“Just tell me why, Leifer.”

“Look,” he said gently, “it’s different than you imagine. It’s . . . there’s a need, and . . . it’s not a bad thing, Enna. I don’t know what happened the other night. I lost control. You were trying to stop me, like you were my enemy, and I had to . . . I’m sorry. But I believe that I’m learning to control it.”

“Then teach me the fire, too, so I can help you,” she said, feeling suddenly bold, but a little afraid, like balancing on the edge of a precipice just for the thrill. But she felt confident, too, that she could handle it better than Leifer. For all he was older, Enna had taught a young Leifer to use a slingshot, and Enna had been the first to climb a tall tree. Enna had trained him to set up his kindling and send the flint’s spark into pine shavings.

“Teach me, and together we can figure this out,” she said.

His lips twitched, a hint at a smile. “It would be nice, I think . . . but I can’t. I don’t think I should.” He paced away from her. “I want to figure this out for myself. It’s my chance to make everything better.”

“Everything what? And since when did you care about anything but the four seasons and salt on your porridge?”

“Since I . . . since I learned about the fire.”

Enna hefted her pack on one shoulder. “Then I’d best go. While I’m gone, don’t be rash, all right?”

She shook her head at herself as she walked away. It was almost funny, telling a boy who set his sister on fire not to be rash.

It was a relief to settle in the back of Doda’s small wagon and feel the productive motion of the donkey’s step and the uneven road. The trees jolted by, and she imagined they, not the wagon, were jumping and tilting like dizzy children.

The wagon was crowded with Doda's carved wood bowls, as well as two Forest girls Enna knew casually. Enna took care to keep her legs isolated, but the occasional bumps knocked her crate against her ankles, and she winced.

"What happened to your legs?" asked one of the other riders.

"Nothing," said Enna. She refused to let Leifer become a bit of Forest gossip.

Doda picked up Finn and his bag of home-knit pullovers an hour into their journey. He was quiet, occasionally passing a worried glance over Enna's legs or face. She wanted to talk to him about Leifer, but not in front of the other travelers. He seemed to understand, so they rode in silence.

The party camped that night, and by afternoon of the next day, Doda's wagon was one of hundreds heading down the main road to the city. The land was open there, stripped of trees and striped with farms that rolled where the earth rose and fell. The city itself was built on the tallest hill, completely ensconced in an ancient stone wall five men high. The lines of the city led the eye to look up, where the three- and four-story buildings grew and dozens of towers and turrets ascended, red tile roofs topped with iron spears. Up the sloping streets, at the highest point in the city, the palace blazed, pale stone washed orange in the setting sun.

The guards at the gates had tripled since Enna had last been through them, and the line of wagons moved painfully slowly. When Doda's wagon finally passed the gates, night had fallen. They set up their camp on the stones of the market-square, back to back with many other Forest dwellers and merchants of other towns here to make their monthly profit.

Enna sighed as she finally sat down while Finn prepared a quick meal. Sidi, one of the girls from their wagon, was gushing to the others about her imminent wedding.

"Embo's got a plot out by his da's, and we've got enough coin saved up to buy a goat next spring. And Embo's been cutting and storing wood for our house for a year. . . . "

Finn glanced at Enna, and she rolled her eyes at him and smiled. *Embo's been storing wood*, she thought mockingly. *He sounds duller than winter.*

Sidi was still singing Embo's praises when Doda returned from stabling the donkey, sat beside Enna, and shook her shoulder teasingly.

"Mercy, Enna," said Doda, "you shouldn't let your face show how jealous you are of that Sidi."

“Ha,” said Enna.

“So what about it, girl? When’re we going to see you secure your own Embo?”

“You’ll never see me with an Embo,” said Enna. “For one thing, our names would sound horrible together.”

“Excuse me,” said Finn, stepping around Doda to leave their camp and walk out into the market. Enna wondered what friends he was seeking out so late at night.

Doda thumbed in the direction Finn had gone. “What about . . . ?”

“Finn?” Enna smiled and looked down. “When we were younger, our friends teased that we’d end up together, but it was all nonsense.”

“Was it?” Doda raised her brows. “I wonder. Seems to me the boy might be fond of you.”

Enna shook her head. “We’ve been friends for years and he’s never said a thing. He’s a nice boy. Truly the nicest boy I’ve ever known. How does one person get to be so nice, Doda? Did his ma nurse him on honey milk?”

Doda nudged Enna with her boot and laughed. “Nice? Seems like you might like nice.”

Enna straightened and sighed with exhaustion. “He’s just Finn. We’ve been friends too long and I know him too well, you know? And he’s still a boy, Doda. If I ever find a man, he’ll have to be a man, really a man, to handle me.”

Doda shrugged and crawled into her bedroll. Enna lay down carefully, arranging the blankets around her ankles, and turned on her side. There, sitting against the wall, was Finn.

“Oh,” she said, “I didn’t know you’d come back.”

He did not answer. In the light of the crescent moon, she could not see where he was looking.

“Finn, did . . . ” She started to ask him if he had heard her speaking to Doda, then decided that she did not want to know. What had she said, anyway? She could not remember exactly, just that she and Finn were not a couple, surely something he already knew. *No harm done*, she thought—she hoped. She bade him good night and uneasily tried to fall asleep.

Enna woke in the bruised-eye blue of predawn to the creaking of wagons and scratching of dragged barrels. Finn slung his sack of knitted goods on his shoulder and wandered off to sell elsewhere, a halfhearted smile on his

lips as he nodded farewell to Enna. She did not know if she had hurt his feelings the night before, and she realized that if she had, Finn would never say a word.

Enna set up her crate of eggs next to Doda's wood bowls, and as soon as marketday crowds wandered in, she began to pitch lower prices than normal. It would be nice to make some extra coin, but her gaze kept wandering to the rising streets, up to the wind-fingered orange flags on the palace turrets.

Across the market-square, Enna thought she eyed a small group of palace guards, and she strained on tiptoe to spot any familiar faces. They were lost in the crowd. A woman purchased a dozen eggs, and when Enna had filled her basket, she blinked at what was revealed. Inside her crate, in the middle of her cream and pale yellow supply, sat one orange chicken egg, the color bright as a poisonous berry.

Enna peered covertly at the crowd. There, walking steadily but quickly away, she was sure she spotted an all-too-familiar figure. A boy of fifteen, slight, unremarkable but for a shaggy head of hair that stood nearly straight up. Razo. He had been an animal worker in the city as well, and Enna remembered often wondering with Isi and the other girls if his hair naturally stood on end or if he encouraged it up to compensate for his short stature.

Enna put a hand over her mouth to hide a smile as her thoughts turned mischievous. When she had kept the king's chickens in the city, Razo had spent a week slipping brightly painted eggs under one of her hens and had Enna convinced that the creature was suffering some horrible ailment. There had been pranks to get back at him in the past, but it seemed the gauntlet had been thrown yet again.

Enna held up the odd egg, threw back her shoulders, and shouted.

"The orange egg! I have it, the orange egg of the omen!"

A bent woman stared at her suspiciously. "What are you gabbing about, girl?"

"Haven't you heard of the orange egg that guarantees the finder fortune and long life?" Enna turned slightly to the gaping Doda and winked. "It's a treasure. And to celebrate my luck, I'm selling all my eggs for half the price!"

No one seemed to have heard of a portentous orange egg, but Enna's exclamations and prices brought in a small crowd. Enna glanced slyly to where Razo had gone. She could see him standing among his brothers and

their wooden goods for sale. His gaze was directed at her, and he seemed completely stunned.

It did not take Enna long to empty her stock of eggs and attract curious bystanders as well. People walked away, muttering about the special egg to their companions. Razo soon stood a few paces away, staring at Enna and looking fretful.

"Razo," she said, and smiled at him. "I haven't seen you since my last trip to the city. How've you been?"

Razo nodded in answer and shuffled closer. "Wh-what you got there, Enna-girl?"

"Don't you see?" she said with high enthusiasm. "It's the orange egg of the omen."

Razo groaned. "Oh, Enna, there's no orange egg . . . "

"How can you say that? Look!" She held the thing up close to his face and barely kept from laughing.

"Enna, shh." He looked around uncomfortably. "I feel bad now. I only meant it as a joke, really, a kind of 'hello, I'm here, too,' you know? I was sure you'd know it was me. I didn't think you'd get so worked up—"

"There she is!"

Three palace guards with iron-tipped javelins interrupted Razo's confession. Enna started and nearly dropped the egg. She did not recognize any of them.

The tallest one saluted her with his javelin. "We heard of you, miss, from across the market-square, the finder of the long-searched-for orange egg."

"Uh . . . ," said Enna.

The sound of the hard wings of pigeons was suddenly loud in her ears, and in a moment she was covered in the birds, as they perched on her shoulders and arms and one proudly on her head.

"You see, even the birds recognize the egg," said another soldier.

"Er . . . ," said Enna, suspiciously watching the birds flit away.

"We should take you before the king. This is a great day for all of Bayern."

Enna glanced at Razo and thought that he must look even more astonished than she did. "Uh, yes, of course, let's go."

"Are you a friend of hers, then?" the tall guard asked Razo. "Lucky lad." He thumped Razo's shoulder and turned to escort Enna through the crowd.

As soon as they were out of sight of Razo, a young woman with her hair wrapped up in a scarf like a Forest woman's walked in step beside Enna.

"I just wanted to congratulate you, miss, on your remarkable find."

She turned her face, and Enna stopped midstride to laugh, at once understanding that Isi had sent the guards. And even the pigeons, no doubt prodded by Isi's gift with bird speech, had been part of the ploy.

"Oh, Isi, that was brilliant!"

"Razo will never recover, I think," said Isi, smiling broadly.

"Nor will I, you rascal. You should feel my heart thumping. When the birds landed on me, what a fright! And I saw myself before the king trying to explain. . . . I'm so glad it's you."

They flung their arms around each other and laughed and hugged. Enna held her friend at arm's length and looked her over.

"But what are you doing out here, and in . . . ?"

"In the old goose girl disguise? I like to go out occasionally without the fanfare, you know, just walk around and feel like a normal person. If I don't hide my hair, I can't go two steps from the palace without being recognized as the princess."

Enna nodded. Isi's hair was yellow, a novelty in a land of black and brown hair, and when uncovered it hung to her hips. Even though Isi was from another kingdom, her accent sounded truly Bayern, one word bleeding into the next, with short vowels and deep consonants. Enna noted that today the princess sounded like a city woman, though she often slipped into the rougher tones of a Forest dweller. Enna smiled, remembering that if there was one thing her friend did well, it was imitating sounds.

But something seemed different in Isi, in her expression, as though she were pained and trying to hide it. Enna tried to guess what might be amiss. "So, any news? I've been hoping to hear that you're expecting a, you know . . ."

Isi sighed. "Yes, you and half the court. Everyone wants an heir to the throne. It's been two years, and a touch of desperation has crept into the ministers' eyes. Look at you. Whenever I see you again after some time apart, I have to remember how pretty you are. And how about me?" Isi turned sideways with a serious face, as though she posed for a portrait.

"You still look like the goose girl to me."

"Good," said Isi.

They continued to stroll through the market. Enna glanced at the guards to see if they looked confused by their talk. She did not know how much the people of the palace knew, as she and Razo and Finn knew, of the way this foreigner came to marry their prince Geric. She was certain they knew pieces of the story—how a princess of the neighboring western kingdom had been betrothed to the prince, but the treacherous lady-in-waiting rode into the city instead, bearing the name Princess Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee. And how the true princess, aided by a group of animal workers, confronted the false bride in front of the king and prince before the marriage took place.

But did they know of the months when their princess hid her yellow hair in a Forest woman's headscarf, donned a Forest accent, called herself Isi, and tended the king's geese? Did they know that she was largely responsible for the Forest dwellers gaining citizenship? And did they believe the rumors of her power with wind and birds?

"I like to see what friends the Forest lets loose on marketday, but I didn't expect to be so lucky as to have my Enna back," said Isi. She purchased small bags of roasted nuts and gave them to the guards and Enna. "This outing is often my only time away from the palace. Seems like I don't leave much lately."

"Why not?"

Isi shrugged, and Enna could read in her manner that she would rather talk about it when they were alone.

"I'm glad I made it here today," said Enna, "if only for the Razo trick."

"Whenever you come back—"

"It's like I never left." Then Enna remembered. "Leifer," she said heavily. "Isi, I've got to talk to you privately."

Isi nodded and without any questions gestured her guards toward the palace.

Chapter 3

They did not speak of Leifer as they left the market-square and climbed the narrow, cobbled streets. Enna had not seen Isi since her mother took sick. She was shocked to hear now that the young prince, Geric's brother, had passed away from a fever in early summer.

"I would've come see you," said Isi, "but Geric was stricken, and things here were . . . " She paused and looked around distractedly. "Watch that cartwheel."

"What?" said Enna.

"Oh, nothing." Isi seemed embarrassed and did not explain.

The farther they walked, the more distant Isi seemed, and sometimes she did not respond at all to what Enna said. Enna watched her silently, worry creeping over her like a chill.

When at last they reached the hilltop and the palace courtyard, Isi dismissed the guards and took Enna to a side entrance. The door was partly ajar, but before Enna could push it open, a breeze did so for her. Isi tugged at her headscarf to loosen it, then another breeze unwound it from her head and laid it in Isi's hands. Her long yellow hair fell free.

"Isi, your skill with the wind is much better than I remember," said Enna.

Isi tilted her head and whispered something about a palace page in a hurry.

"What was that?" said Enna.

Isi scrunched her eyes closed and batted the air before her face. "Being out in the crowd, it affects me so much faster than it used to. Let's go somewhere—quieter."

Isi took Enna's hand and led her deeper into the palace, farther in and farther down. Isi nodded to a sentry standing beside a stone door, and he grunted as he pulled it open. There were no windows. The guard lit a rush torch on the wall, and thin smoke crept along the ceiling. Enna could make out a small room, shelves loaded with armor, lances, javelins, axes, golden boxes, ivory statuettes.

“A treasury,” said Isi. She sat on a blanket that lay on the floor, and Enna followed. The sentry shut the door, and there was a hollow thunk as it sealed. The light in the room was low and yellow. Trembling shadows moved over Isi’s face.

Isi sighed. Her face smoothed as she relaxed. “Geric found this place for me a few months ago, just after it started to get worse. He says he can’t talk to me anywhere else. He says it sadly.”

“What is it?”

“The wind.”

“Oh,” said Enna, beginning to understand.

“You know, when I first learned to understand its language, I could feel only the bigger winds. I’d sit in the goose pasture, and when a breeze rose off the stream I could hear, or rather sense, where it had been, what else it had recently touched—wet stones, a sparrow, a lost goose. And when I was indoors, I rarely felt anything, just a draft from the hall, a slip of air from an open window. Now, Enna, it’s everywhere. I’ve come to realize that air is made up of tiny parts, and wind is a lot of them moving fast. Right now, even in a still room, I can feel the air. I hear it constantly.

“That’s why Geric likes to trap us in here like a couple of worms in the earth. We can shut out most of the movements. And I can have a few moments of . . . quiet.” Isi smiled. “So now that I can hear you, tell me about Leifer.”

Enna took a breath. “I was wondering if there’s such a thing as fire speech, like how you know bird and wind speech. Leifer, I think he’s learned to control fire somehow, but he . . . can’t seem to control it very well.”

“Oh,” said Isi, a soft, birdlike sound, and gently lifted the edge of Enna’s skirt from her ankles. “You’re hurt. I wonder why I didn’t hear the wind whisper of it before. There was so much going on outside, I guess, and that bit got lost. I can have a physician look at it later. Enna, did Leifer do that?”

Enna shrugged off the concern and jumped into the story of Leifer’s trip to the deep wood, the vellum, and his behavior up to the night when he set her on fire. “You see why I need to know what I can, now, before he does something else, something worse.”

Isi looked at her a long moment, still and unblinking, as though she were a robin waiting for a predator to pass. When she spoke, it was in her softer voice that Enna remembered from evenings around the hearth when Isi

would tell stories to the animal workers. “Fire. It must have a language, though I never learned it. According to the old tales, most everything has a language.

“The story I know says that the Creator first spoke the word to make the world, and then all things could speak to one another, but each thing multiplied and withdrew into its own kind and forgot the languages of the others. Once snail and stone spoke, wind and tree, frog and water.” She took Enna’s hand and looked at her fingers as though for comfort. “Once, people could speak to all things, and that means to me that it’s possible for us to learn all those languages again.”

“Anyone can?” asked Enna.

“Some people have more of a knack for it than others, it seems, just like a good wheelwright can burn bread and a good baker might miss a nail. Once, before knowing wind speech gave me any trouble, I tried to teach Geric, but he just couldn’t learn it. Fortunately.

“There are three different gifts—people-speaking, animal-speaking, and nature-speaking. Some people are born with the ability to learn one. I knew others from my home kingdom who had people-speaking from birth, and all their lives they knew how to talk to people just so, to encourage love and loyalty. I wasn’t born with wind speech—I was sixteen when I first understood its words, so who knows when and how a person can learn?

“Even for people with the knack, I think most languages are too difficult for us to figure out on our own. When I was little, my aunt taught me how to hear birds speaking to one another, and I had a skill for imitating the sounds back. Even with natural talent, I needed her help to understand in the beginning.”

“But no one taught you to hear the wind,” said Enna.

“No,” said Isi, “that was different. I was ready to hear it, I guess, and seeking it. With the wind, all it took was one word to get the sense of it. After wind gave me a first word, I began to hear many more, and then I began to be able to suggest a breeze go this way or that.”

“Well, I don’t know who would’ve taught Leifer to understand fire speech, unless that vellum gives him power,” said Enna.

“I doubt it,” said Isi. Enna smiled and remembered that for someone with such uncanny abilities, Isi was remarkably unbelieving when it came to superstitions or reports of magic. “Maybe the vellum contains writing about fire-speaking, and he’s learned it on his own.”

“That blasted vellum. You know, it makes me mighty uneasy, Isi, that my brother is chest-deep in something sticky and I can’t haul him out.”

“Fire.” Isi’s eyes looked unfocused, as though she were seeing something far away. “It must be extraordinary and . . . and terrible. I don’t know what it would feel like to understand it.”

“Well, it’s bound to be something like wind, right?”

“I wonder.” Isi rubbed her forehead and looked down. “Wind is unique. Its very existence is a language, and it can’t help but carry the images of where it’s been. Every air movement that touches my skin tells me of what else it’s touched. But fire doesn’t move like wind, and it’s so much more intense. I don’t know what to do for him.”

“So, you don’t know of a way to, I don’t know, erase it? Maybe if I could learn the fire tongue myself, I could figure out how it works and help him.”

Isi blinked. “Erase it? I read once, somewhere in that old library, accounts of a desert kingdom called Yasid, to the south. Travelers from there reported of a people who had some kind of relationship with fire. Maybe they would have an answer to that, but I don’t.”

Enna looked at the orange heart of the smoky torch on the wall and was surprised to feel hopeful. “So, maybe the best thing after all would be for me to—”

“No,” said Isi. “No, don’t, Enna. Please don’t try to learn fire.”

“Why, Isi? I thought, being who you are, you’d be at least curious to try.”

“There are consequences to learning to speak with any part of creation. I’m learning that at last.”

Enna pressed her lips together. “Consequences, like your distraction.”

“Yes, for the wind it’s the constant howling. It took time for that to affect me, but the nature of fire is so severe, maybe what’s happening to me with the wind is happening to Leifer with the fire, but much more rapidly.”

Isi stood and walked to a shelf, fingering some small ornament there. “And the distraction isn’t the only change. You know my horse, Avlado? I had one before I met you—Falada. My aunt taught me to attend a horse’s birth and, when he emerged, to listen for him to say his first word—his name—and repeat it back. That was the beginning of our communication, and we grew to be able to speak together silently. He’s dead now. We were . . . separated, and he went mad. I missed him so much, I made the same connection later with Avlado, but now I think I was reckless. Maybe Falada never would’ve gone mad if it hadn’t been for me. Maybe speech between

us was . . . unbalanced. As much as I love Avlado, I'll never be so careless again."

"Isi, you can't blame yourself for Falada."

"Can't I?" said Isi. "Are you sure? Look at me with the wind. It used to be a peaceful thing. But now it presses on me with its language, overcoming me. Is that what happened to Falada?" Her chin quivered. "And will I go mad, too?"

Enna stood to comfort her, but Isi shook her off.

"At first, the wind was difficult for me to hear and harder for me to control. No longer. Not just its voice has grown stronger."

Enna sensed a finger of wind brush her cheek and flinched.

"When I first learned to ask wind to change its course," said Isi, "I could only take an existing breeze and suggest a new path, and it didn't always respond. Not now."

The breeze licked Enna's cheek again and then began to spin around her, growing larger and stronger, whipping her hair so that Enna had to close her eyes.

"I can always feel the air vibrating around me, Enna," she said in a strangely calm voice. "I can make a wind from nothing, and it always obeys."

The wind blew sharp around Enna's head, gusting into her ears, tugging on her clothes. She hugged herself against its force. This was not what she was expecting from Isi, once so quiet and careful, now making a delirious windstorm in the belly of the palace. The weapons and armor rattled on the shelves like chattering teeth, and the torchlight sputtered madly. In the center of the wind, Enna felt pushed and pulled, barely able to keep her feet. The loss of control was frustrating, then alarming.

Isi gripped Enna's hand. "Frightening, isn't it?"

"Enough!" Enna shouted.

Abruptly the wind died. The room was still. Enna heard the stone door scrape open.

"Is everything all right, Princess?" said the sentry.

"Yes." Enna could see Isi's face more clearly now. Her cheeks were pink, and she bit her lip and look ashamed.

He shut the door, and Isi looked away. She seemed a bit shaken, blinking more than usual, her breath quick. "I'm sorry. I meant to just show you how things've changed since you've been gone. And maybe to show you what

might be going on in Leifer's mind. But you see now, right? You see how easy it is to lose control, and why it's better that you leave the fire alone."

Enna blinked and found her legs felt weak. She sat down, and Isi sat beside her.

"I see," said Enna.

"I've gone through three waiting women in two years. It's trying for me and disturbing to others, but in the end it's only wind. But Leifer . . ."

"Yes," said Enna, her thoughts as dark and dancing as the treasure room shadows, "fire's another matter altogether."

Isi looked up. "The old tales say once a person could speak all the languages. Maybe it's just because I know so few, just some bird, and wind, and the bond with my horse. But if I could speak everything, then I wouldn't be overwhelmed by wind. The knowledge would be balanced.

"If that's so, can you imagine what it's like for Leifer to just know fire? A thing that can't exist without destroying something else? Leifer must be so lost in fire speech that he can't see the light for the flame. I think it must be too much for any person to balance being human and hearing fire. Flame and flesh can't live together."

The stone door rasped against the ground, and a broad, handsome man could be seen calming a sentry. Enna could hear the sentry whispering, " . . . noise . . . rattling and howling . . . said she was all right." The young man nodded to the sentry and then stepped into the torch-lit gloom.

"Drat these internal windstorms," he said with a smile. "I can't imagine what might be the cause."

Isi smiled and heaved a blissful sigh. "Oh, hello there."

He stooped and kissed Isi on the forehead. "I thought you might be here when I heard tell of a certain visitor. Good summer to you, Enna. Found this little room a bit drafty, have you?" Enna laughed. "If the road conditions are what keep you away so long, I'll attack my father with the improvement issue today."

"It has been a time. I was sorry, Geric, to hear of your little brother."

Geric bowed his head and nodded.

"Enna's brother has made an unnerving discovery," said Isi, changing the subject.

Enna explained Leifer's fire-speaking, his attack, and his sudden antagonism against Bayern.

“We don’t need division right now,” said Geric. “Do others in the Forest feel as Leifer does, that they really don’t belong to Bayern?”

“I wouldn’t take it too seriously,” said Enna. “It’s very odd for him to suddenly be so resentful.”

“Is it?” Isi looked thoughtful and newly worried.

“All the same, I’d like to have the Forest behind us right now,” said Geric. “It could be war, Enna.”

“War? I wouldn’t’ve even mentioned what Leifer said if I thought it would worry you. Honestly, the few people who feel disloyal are no threat.”

“Not the Forest. It’s Tira, the kingdom to the southeast. You may have noticed more soldiers in the city. There have been rumors all spring, and Tira has begun to harass our borders. Forest dwellers are citizens now, and I’ll expect them to join and defend Bayern. Will they answer the call, do you think?”

Enna waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, yes. For every big-talking boy, there’re fifty Forest lads who are aching to belong to the whole of Bayern. I think it’d make a difference, though, if someone high in rank courted our loyalty. We’d like to believe that we really are important to you.”

Geric nodded, his eyes distant as though already making plans. Enna met Isi’s look.

“War,” Enna said. “Soon?”

“Soon,” said Isi, tilting her head as though she heard the tidings on the wind.

Chapter 4

Geric sent out messengers calling all Forest javelin bearers to meet at Sprucegrove in three days. Enna left the capital ahead of Geric and Isi to find Leifer. When she came home, she saw the chickens were fed and watered, but the house was empty, the hearth cold. That night she slept fitfully, starting awake every time she thought she smelled smoke. Disappointed, in the morning she freshened her pack and set off alone.

An empty house was a lonely thing, but solitude in the Forest felt right. There was too much life bursting beneath her feet and in the canopy over her head to need human companionship. As she neared the campsite midway to Sprucegrove, other travelers began to fall in beside her. Like her, they seemed silenced by their long walk alone in the woods, and the sounds of their breathing and bootfalls were just a part of the groaning, beating, swaying, and creaking voice of the Forest. They were all Forest boys, most younger than her, nearly all carrying a javelin and painted shield.

She slept that night in a clearing, hedged in by snoring bodies. She listened to the crackle of the campfire until deep night and, half-asleep, wondered if its pops and bursts were words. There was a silent, shared breakfast, and then the informal group continued on. Several among the boys had also been animal keepers, though most had now returned to their families in the Forest or taken other occupation in the city. They walked together, engaged in the slow, halting talk that grows out of travel and plenty of time.

"Move aside," said one, jogging up from behind. "I've got a word to give Enna-girl."

"Razo." Enna could not say his name without adding a laugh. Razo pressed his mouth shut and looked at her as they walked. He had the most expressive face of any person she knew.

"It was Isi who sent the guards, wasn't it?" he said finally.

Enna laughed again.

"And the birds, I suppose, weren't acting on their own. Huh. Well, all right, that was good." He pulled himself a little straighter, walking as

though he thought himself quite tall and not two hands shorter than Enna. “Orange egg of the omen. I’ll probably laugh about that soon, any moment now.”

They arrived at Sprucegrove in the golden heat of late afternoon. The prince’s yellow tent stood in the center of the small market-square and was surrounded by smaller tents, wagons loaded with supplies, and a line of horses. The assembly implied he intended to stay several days.

Dozens of boys and men milled around the square or sat together in anxious groups. The hushed conversation and trembling mood chilled Enna’s stomach. She could see three distinct shield designs and so knew there must be some, if not all, of the members of the Forest’s three separate hundred-bands. In Bayern, each village maintained a group of one hundred soldiers for defense and for times of war. Larger villages and towns were represented by several hundred-bands. The Forest’s three hundred-bands had never gathered together before. Enna thought how the word had certainly spread quickly.

Isi stood beside Geric at the mouth of their tent, her wringing hands expressing what her face did not. Enna left Razo and ran up to Isi’s side.

“A word, Your Highness,” said Enna.

Isi smirked and punched her arm. “Oh, stop it, Enna.”

“Well, what should I call you? You look so . . . I don’t know, official.”

Isi closed her eyes, and Enna thought she might be trying to shut out the many voices of the wind. “We’ve had news.”

“What is it?”

Isi glanced up at Geric, who was mounting his horse. Two mounted guards hit swords against shields above their heads. The conversations hushed immediately, and nearly three hundred faces turned to their prince. Geric drew himself up and looked out at the crowd. It had always seemed to Enna that Geric’s face was made for smiling—the corners of his lips curled slightly even at rest. But just then, Geric’s severe expression made her wonder how she had ever thought so before.

“My brothers and sisters of the Forest,” he began, “I think you’ve waited long enough to hear what I’ve come to say. Let those who continue to arrive learn from your mouths the news of this day.

“Until recently I was unaware that many of you still questioned your place in the kingdom of Bayern. I had planned to come here and assure you of Bayern’s need and desire to count the Forest dwellers among our own.

There have been unsettling rumors of war coming from the south all summer, and I knew that before long the crown would be calling to all her citizens to raise the javelin in defense of her borders.

"Time has already overtaken us. Not three hours ago a messenger from the capital overtook my party here in the Forest. His news was grim. Tira has struck."

"Oh," Enna said softly. She heard similar gasps of disbelief and anger simmering throughout the camp.

Isi took Enna's hand. "It's bad, Enna. This is bad."

"Our borders are already broken," Geric said. His voice commanded attention, and the murmuring stopped. "We know they've taken Folcmar and Adelmund, and perhaps other towns closer to their border. They were moving north toward Eylbold and Ostekin, and by now those towns may have fallen victim to their invasion.

"The king set out with his army today to defend our land from further conquest on the fields of Ostekin. I'm called to meet him there and to bring my own army, gathered as I may. I'll not command you, Forest kin, as this will be your first service in the name of Bayern. But I will ask you in all boldness to offer your javelins, your swords, and, if necessary, your lives to stop the assault of the Tiran armies.

"Will you join us? Will those javelins given to you by your king rise to fight beside him? Will you be Bayern?"

The Forest boys banged javelins on shields, raised their fists in the air, hollered their affirmation, and swore to fight to the death. The quickness of the response tightened Enna's throat.

"So ready to die," she said. "I hadn't a doubt that Forest boys'd be quick to be loyal, but I never imagined they'd also be quick to offer death."

"They don't know death yet," said Isi. "They don't know what it is they offer." Her eyes were wet, and she rubbed her face as though to reach a deep headache. "I need to get out of the wind." She gestured around her randomly. "It's all so much."

Enna nodded and led her to the tent, then stopped when she caught a glimpse of Leifer. He was standing at the edge of the camp, his eyes on the prince.

"Go on in, Isi. I'll be right back."

Geric called the captains of the hundred-bands to him for counsel, and Leifer headed that way as well. Enna caught his arm and pulled him to her.

“Leifer, you’re here.”

“Enna.” He smiled at her, so honest and open that she was tempted to throw her arms around his neck and get a big-brother hug. “I was with Gebi when we heard. I almost didn’t come, but now . . . ”

“I’m glad you came. This isn’t what I expected, either. I thought he’d just give some rousing speech to win your allegiance, you know, make you feel all cozy and Bayern.”

“So did I.” His gaze hopped to the southeast horizon, and she could feel his arm tighten. “This’s better.”

“Are you going, then?”

“Of course. You think I’d leave my friends to follow our king without me?”

Enna laughed. “*Our* king. You’d think the boy from a few days ago wasn’t ranting about gathering a Forest army for rebellion.”

“I want to be Bayern. I want to be loyal to the king. Before, I was just angry, and now, I don’t know, that’s all gone, and instead there’s Tira. They’re the enemy. It’s like the fire’s just been waiting for them, and now it’s time to burn. I should tell the prince.”

She pulled his sleeve to stop him. “He knows. I told him about you.” She studied his face. “I don’t understand, Leifer. A fortnight past I’d’ve said you were as constant as a walnut tree, but first you get all riled up about Bayern, and then just as quickly you’re ready to fight Tira. Is it the fire doing this to you?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned, then shook it off. “I don’t want to think about it. Right now, everything is so clear, Enna, it all feels right. I’m going to pledge myself to the prince so I can help fight Tira.”

“But, Leifer . . . ”

He held her shoulders and looked at her with a small, hopeful smile. “You’ll be proud of me, little sister. And that makes me happy.”

Enna watched him approach the prince and explain something with his hands, his brow wrinkled in earnestness. The movement of his lips made Enna think he was probably stuttering. She smiled sadly. He could rage against the kingdom on a Forest night, but when it came to addressing the prince, he became a little boy.

Enna hurried back to Isi’s tent. Geric entered just before her, speaking low with one of his counselors. Isi was sitting on a floor cushion, her face in her hands. Enna sat beside her and began to plait one of Isi’s locks, as she

used to do in the palace on cold evenings. The attention seemed to soothe her.

"Well, my lady, what's my part in all this?" said Enna.

"I hope you'll go."

"But as what? I need something to do, Isi. My arms are itching as though I've been idling an afternoon lying on wool. I'd like to help, but not like"—she hesitated—"not like before, when I lived at the palace with you. I can't just be the princess's friend, the girl who sits around while the princess does important things."

"I'm sorry, Enna," said Isi, "I didn't realize."

"Of course not. And I was happy just to be there, before. But now I need a place, Isi, a mission. I'm chewing at my bit just to go somewhere and run."

"Come as my maiden," Isi said brightly. "A maiden usually serves a queen, but I'd rather call you that than my lady-in-waiting. I want you by me, Enna. I need your clear sight."

"Princess's maiden. Fine. That's me."

"So, you'll go?"

"Yes," said Enna. "Of course, yes. You have to ask? You're going, I'm going."

"You're not going, Isi," said Geric. His counselor left, eyes averted as though he did not want to witness to an unpleasant argument.

"I'd like to go," said Isi.

"No." Geric rolled up the maps. She stood beside him, but he would not look at her.

"Bayern women go with their men to war, to inspire courage and, and to remind them of what they would lose."

Geric winced. "You're not Bayern."

"Geric, I could help. I could read the wind and give you numbers and locations, and I could push them back, confuse them."

"I said no!" He slammed his fist on the table.

Enna held her breath so she would not say a word. She was tempted to step in, but this was Geric. She had never seen him lose his temper.

"I don't need to be reminded what I would lose." He looked at Isi. "I'm a terrible prince. I should put my kingdom first and everything else second, but you're first. I want you by my side every second, but I know I would crumble if I lost you."

She stepped closer and he gripped her in his arms, burying his face in her neck.

“But I will go.” Isi stroked his hair, and his shoulders began to shake.

Enna slipped out, quietly lowering the tent flap behind her. She looked up to see Finn standing in the shadows, his arms flat against his sides as though he were already practicing at being a soldier.

“Finn,” she said, surprised. She tried to keep her face relaxed, pretending not to remember their last uncomfortable confrontation in the market-square. “I didn’t realize that you were here.”

“Seems that’s happening a lot lately,” he said.

From anyone else, Enna thought, that statement would have been biting, but from Finn’s mouth it was just the truth.

“I’m going to fight.” His face was smooth, almost without emotion. She had never seen him look so old. “I just wanted you to know, so if I go missing, someone would know I was here and could tell my ma.”

Enna nodded. Finn returned the nod, smiled briefly, and walked back to his hundred-band. She stayed behind, leaning against a pine for comfort. Before her, the market-square and surrounding woods were dotted with cookfires, points of light mirroring the randomness of the stars. There was no singing. The general hush of many low voices drawn together swept to her on a Forest breeze, as though the Forest sighed disquiet and warning. Enna pressed her cheek against the bark and breathed in the grounding smell of pine. Everything had suddenly become quite serious.

Chapter 5

Geric's bands marched south. *Four days,* he had said. *Four days,* the Forest boys muttered to one another. Each night they practiced swordplay around the fires, grunting and slicing and laughing. Enna watched, disturbed by their levity. Two years before, when Isi and her friends exposed the false princess before Bayern's king, her treacherous countrymen had drawn their swords and fought the king's guards. Enna had stood in the midst of that battle, had heard the rush of a thrown javelin, had seen soldiers cut other men down. She could not now forget that the products of fighting were corpses, as well as the haunted looks and shifting hands of the surviving boys who had learned to kill.

Mostly she watched Leifer. He lit the fires each night, and soon all the prince's camp knew of his talent. A boy of fourteen years, eager, always armed, sat beside Leifer and begged to be taught. "I'm a warrior like my grandfather," he said. "I want to light my enemies on fire and please the king."

Leifer glanced up at Enna, who stood by a neighboring fire, frying bread. He shook his head. "I can't teach you. Go on back to your own camp."

The boy left, angry. For a moment, Enna thought she could see a pale corner of vellum peeking from beneath Leifer's overtunic before he pulled it closed. The hand on his chest thrummed eagerly.

"You did right," said Enna, sitting beside him.

"You see," he said, "I'm making you proud already. And you thought all I was good for was chopping wood and finding the nastiest bugs to put on your pillow."

Enna slapped a too hot piece of bread in his hand and laughed at how gingerly he held and cooled it. "Tell me more about the fire, Leifer. Did the talent just happen? Or did you learn something from that vellum you found?"

Leifer's expression hardened. "I don't think we should talk about this."

Enna did not respond, eating her supper and listening to the angry sounds of the campfire biting into a log.

After a time, Leifer sighed, sounding resigned. “You’re my sister, my whole family, and the smartest person I know. What you said before . . . if you want me to try to teach you, I will.”

Enna hesitated. “No. I think it’s dangerous, and I wish you hadn’t gotten tangled in it yourself. I mean, think what fire does. It eats things up. It destroys.”

Leifer considered. “It does so much more than that.”

“And makes smoke that clouds your brain,” she said.

“And makes heat and light, and makes the night beautiful and meat taste good, and makes me feel . . . ”

“Scorched,” said Enna.

“Alive,” Leifer said with conviction.

Alive, she thought. His eyes did seem brighter, his skin healthy and pink, not pale from languishing in the Forest shadow. Enna shrugged. Such a gift offered so many opportunities to do good things. Isi had warned her, and she trusted her friend’s instinct in this, but perhaps Leifer knew more than she guessed.

Enna threw some sticks into the fire’s heart, and they sat in silence and watched them blacken and burn. She had always been drawn to a fire in the night, but she had never considered before that there were things to know about fire, that there was a hidden way it worked, and that holding that knowledge imparted power. And she found herself dwelling on something Isi had said before, how learning animal speech or nature speech was a talent and that some people showed more capacity for it than others.

Does that mean, she thought, *since my brother is one of those, that maybe I am, too?*

The thought felt right. Each time she contemplated fire, she felt surer that she *could* learn it and felt a place inside her, a place in her chest, yawn eagerly.

* * *

From sunup to sundown, the company marched. They marched on the broad, rocky road, sometimes spilling onto harvested fields. Farming women stood in doorways, their arms around their children, and stared with little hope at the prince’s small Forest army, only three hundred strong.

Enna and Isi rode in a supply wagon with two other Forest women. Normally, Isi would have ridden Avlado, but she said she did not want to take her horse near a battle, and Enna wanted her close so she could care for

her when the wind became too much. The Forest women were talking of Tira. Isi did not know all of the history between the two countries, so the women told her of Bayern's belligerent past, up until the current king, of how former Bayern armies had raided and harassed Tira. Now Bayern's new peace seemed a weakness.

"And it is," said Enna. "For here we're caught unprepared, marching south to a war that's begun without us."

Isi nodded. "The king underestimated hate's memory."

"Yes," said a Forest woman, her hair wrapped up in a yellow scarf, "the Tiran remember us brutal, and so we were. They'll not give up until they feel we've bled twice for every Tiran ever killed and paid two bushels of wheat for every bushel ever burned."

The Forest women grew silent, and Isi was anxious. Winds fluttered her hair and clothes, and she looked to Enna as a person might before submitting to water and drowning. Though the day was warm, Enna covered her in a thick blanket, so the only place of contact with the wind would be her face. It seemed to help some. After a time she drifted into sleep, and Enna hopped out of the wagon to walk a bit. Finn marched nearby, and she fell in step with him.

"Good morning to you, soldier," she said.

He nodded and kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Finn, why're you going? You don't have to—"

"I'm going because the king gave me my javelin and shield two years ago, and I want to show I'm grateful and protect things and do some good."

Enna laughed. "You interrupted me. You've never interrupted me before."

Finn did not respond.

"All I meant was, good for you."

They walked in silence for a time. Enna found herself wishing she could talk to him about everything she was thinking, worries for Leifer and the strangeness of sudden war and feelings on fire. She was used to Finn's silences, but this kind did not seem to welcome discussion.

When Enna broke away to return to the wagon, Finn said, "Good-bye, Enna," with real sorrow in his voice.

He thinks he's going to die, she thought. The realization made him seem stronger to her than the brave, foolish boys who believed they were

invulnerable. She watched him march on, his face resolute, his hand resting on the hilt of the loaned sword at his hip.

On the morning of the fourth day, Geric called a halt on the breast of a hill.

"They're close enough that the wind knows them." Isi stood on a wagon seat, her arms out, fingers splayed, as though she were a weather vane reaching for every hint of which way the wind blew. "The king's there and a Tiran army. Vast. Men like trees in a forest, swords, the whisk of arrows, the thud of arrows against shields, the soft entry of arrows in flesh, bodies on the ground . . . " She stopped. Enna could only imagine how vividly Isi saw the battle, and her skin ached at the thought of what was to come.

Geric mounted and led the army forward, his horse stepping high as though wishing to canter. The march became swifter. Of the women, Isi and Enna alone did not leave the army for an encampment, choosing to remain in the wagon that would go to the threshold of the battle.

They could hear the noise of battle first—a cacophony of human voices that did not converse and beating metal like a thousand blacksmiths at work. The little army climbed a hill toward the noise. Enna sat on the wall of the wagon and held on to the sides. The wood squeaked under her hand in the uphill strain. The donkey moaned once. Enna looked at a sky masked by clouds, the air softly wet from recent rain, and observed how the air smelled rich and sweet. *It shouldn't be so sweet on a battle day,* she thought. *It should pour.*

The wagon crested the hill, and the noise was suddenly real. Geric called a halt. The captains of the three hundred-bands, also on horseback, drew next to him and looked down. The two armies congregated on a withering wheat field, three thousand on the north side, perhaps five on the other. They saw the king leading his Bayern army, their backs to the north. Geric said something to the captains that Enna could not hear.

The four men began to shout the words of a battle song. As they sang, the men behind them gathered on the crown of the hill and joined in. They raised their shields to their mouths and sang into the rounded metal so the sound of the song reverberated and swelled into the valley. The pulsing metal made an eerie call: *Tear down the borders, tear down the shores, tear down the walls, tear down the doors, the king to victory, we cry, the king to victory.*

The captains called forward, and the Forest bands marched down the hill, still shouting the battle song, their shields lowered now. The action in the valley slowed briefly as faces looked to the new players. The battle was thick. Archers had already dropped their bows for swords, so there was no line of arrows to slow the Forest bands' approach.

Abruptly the song dropped and shouts began. Enna watched three Forest boys cut down before javelins left their hands, and she turned away.

Enna looked at her trembling hands and said, "How is it, Isi?"

Isi closed her eyes. She seemed eerily calm. "The Forest bands, they give our men new hope, surely, but the Tiran forces are greater. For now we're standing our ground."

"The king should've waited to muster more troops before fighting."

Isi nodded. "He was hurrying to protect the people. In addition to four towns, Tira has already taken ten villages."

Enna stood in the wagon to see if she could spot Leifer, but his was one dark-haired, leather-helmeted head among hundreds. Then she saw flames.

Isi's eyes opened wide. "Fire. It's Leifer."

Enna spotted him a little apart, just east of the battlefield, south of his own band. Two Tiran near him were on fire. Her ankles throbbed in memory, and she thought of rushing the field and telling him to stop. Then another fire started, and another.

"He'll draw attention to himself, Isi," she said. "And I don't know that he can control it. Maybe I should—"

A cry burst from below, followed by a wailing and screams of fury. Something was wrong. The Tiran were cheering and the Bayern stumbling back.

"What is it, what is it?" Enna asked anxiously, her eyes scanning the scene. A moment later Isi cried out, her face white.

"Oh, the king," said Isi, "the king has fallen."

Enna could not see his gray mount, his metal helmet, or the ensign of the Bayern sun. The army of Bayern looked smaller. "Fallen? But he isn't . . . is he killed?"

"He tried all his life to avoid war," said Isi, "and to die now, on a battlefield—" Her voice caught in a sob.

The Bayern were screaming savagely and rushing the enemy. The armies of Tira seemed to move forward with confidence. Enna spotted Geric in the

crowd, still mounted, still leading the Forest bands from the side. They appeared to have lost some men.

"Geric." Enna felt panic pull her tight like a rope. "Geric's out there, and, and you! They could wipe out the entire royal family in one day. Isi, I've got to get you away."

Enna hesitated, looking out again where Leifer burned, but Isi's danger felt more critical. She hopped onto the bench, searching frantically for the reins. She had never driven a wagon before. "Go, go!" she shouted to the mule, slapping his backside. He shifted his weight but did not move.

A burst of light. And then screams.

Both girls stood in the wagon and looked out on the scene with a mix of horror and relief. One corner of the field was boiling with flame. Entire groups of Tiran soldiers were burning.

"Oh, Leifer," said Enna.

She could not see him in the bedlam, she could see only explosions of fire. Even from the hilltop Enna could hear the burning men scream. New fires flamed up, again, again, again. The tide of Bayern soldiers stood their ground and slowly, slowly, began to push forward.

"The battle's changing," said Isi, exhaustion and disbelief heavy in her voice.

"How can he keep it up?"

Isi shook her head. "He's out there, right in the middle. Leifer himself is burning. Not on fire, exactly, but burning, somehow."

Below, a Tiran leader was shouting. He pointed his sword up the hill at the two girls and then began to climb.

"They think we're the cause," said Isi.

"Well, let's not tell them differently. It'll allow Leifer more time." Enna grabbed a spare javelin and shook it at the soldier. "We'll never stop, you devils!"

Some forty men broke off from the fighting and followed the Tiran leader. One shouted, "Fire-witch!" and pointed his sword at Enna.

"Oh," said Enna. She gripped the javelin and felt very tiny. "Isi, can you?"

Isi closed her eyes and nodded. The wind gusts suddenly had purpose. Enna could feel them circling the wagon like a great finger making rings in a pool. Bits of grass and dirt picked up, and the wind became a nearly

visible barrier. One of the Tiran soldiers aimed at Isi and let loose an arrow. It hit the wind barrier and flew wild. Isi did not flinch.

"Ha, ha!" Enna brandished the javelin and smiled. "Go back or die!"

The Tiran closed their eyes and raised their hands against the thrash of dirt and pebbles but still pressed forward. Their helmets flew off, their clothes whipped about their body. Sometimes a finger of wind pushed out of the circle and knocked a soldier off his feet. Two tumbled back down the hill. The others kept on.

"Is it going to be enough?" asked Enna.

Isi shook her head. The leader slowly lifted his sword against the force of wind, getting closer and closer. The mule eyed him and the windstorm uncomfortably, lifting its front hooves and bawling. With great exertion, the soldier slapped the mule's rump with the flat of his sword.

The wagon rocked, the mule wailed. Enna dropped the javelin, grabbed Isi, and pulled her out of the lurching wagon. As they landed on the hilltop, the wagon tipped, and the mule and its load slid backward down the slope. The wind grew softer.

"Isi, don't let it go, don't."

"It's getting so hard, so many people . . . " Isi kept her eyes closed, and her concentration appeared to cause her pain. Enna stood in front of her as the men neared.

"You harm her and—and the entire field goes up in flames! You fools, you kill her and you die with her."

The Tiran seemed unconvinced. The wind burst again and pushed several men to the ground, but the others still advanced.

"Forest band, to me!"

A beating of hooves, a responding shout, and Geric crested the hill. His sword downed the farthest soldier. The leader turned away from the girls and called his men around him, rallying to take down the prince. But behind him a hundred-band of Forest men ran up the hill, hollering and throwing javelins.

The prince led the charge, and the Forest men fell in beside him. Enna spotted Razo and Finn among those still alive and fighting. The swordplay was quick and bloody. From this close, Enna could hear the men scream when metal ripped open their middles, could hear them whimper when a finishing blow stopped their hearts. In a few moments, Enna and Isi's

attackers lay in heaps at their feet. The protecting wind dispersed into random breezes. Isi slumped on the ground.

Geric dismounted and took Isi in his arms. “Are you hurt? Are you all right?”

Isi put her face against his chest and breathed out. “I am now. Geric, your father . . .”

Geric nodded and cleared his throat, as if trying to dislodge emotion caught there. His eyes were wet.

A new noise from below caught their attention. Enna and Geric, holding his wife, stood and looked out. The Bayern were cheering. The Tiran soldiers retreated, some fighting as they left, most running for the woods south of the field, toward the villages they had captured and their reinforcements and supplies. Enna could not see Leifer, and amid the shouts of victory, she felt her stomach chill.

“We won this battle,” said Geric, his voice disbelieving. “They won’t take Ostekin now. We wouldn’t have . . . but the fire, Leifer, he changed everything.”

“Geric,” said Enna, “shouldn’t you . . . ” She gestured to the fleeing Tiran and the cheering Bayern, who lacked a king to lead them forward to catch and kill their foes before they could regroup.

“I . . . ” Geric hesitated. The Tiran entered the woods. “We’ll finish it another day.”

Enna thought perhaps it was for the best, looking over the field of slain bodies and wounded, the exhausted men of the king’s army who had been fighting since dawn, and the body of the king himself, slumped over his downed mount, the Bayern banner thrown over his body.

Enna saw Geric’s gaze reach the spot on the field where his father lay slain. His face hardened, and he suddenly looked less like a concerned husband and more like a king. Geric asked Razo and Finn to take Isi to the encampment of women, then raised his sword and shouted atop the hill.

“Bayern, you are victorious! This is just the first battle of this war, so stand together and save the injured. I, Geric-Sinath of Gerhard, king of Bayern, declare this day doesn’t end until every acre of our soil is cleared of the Tiran.”

“How long’ll this day last, then?” asked Enna.

“It feels like forever.” He straightened his shoulders and marched down the hill.

Enna left him and ran into the battlefield. The sky growled with thunder, and when rain began to fall it felt only right. Smoke rose as the rain doused the burning corpses. The wounded moaned and wept. A broad-faced Bayern soldier was wading through the bodies and delivering quick deathblows to the gravely injured Tiran. Enna looked away.

"Leifer," she called, loudly at first, urging herself to believe that he was all right somewhere, that he could answer her call. *Leifer himself is burning*, Isi had said. *Not on fire, exactly, but burning, somehow.*

She found him too quickly, before she had prepared herself, before she had allowed herself to actually think, *Leifer died today.*

She recognized his long, lanky body, the way he let the laces of his boots dangle, the cut of his tunic, though there was nothing else to identify. He looked as though he had burned from the inside out, for his body was worse than his clothing. His skin was charred black and stiff—not a quick death like the others with burned bodies who suffocated on smoke, their skin patchy red and black or just gone. He must have burned slowly, evenly, like a roasted pig.

Enna knelt before him and cursed herself for not stopping him. He had won the battle, she reminded herself, but she felt no consolation. She did not understand what bade him start the fires and make them ever bigger even while the action gutted him of life. But she knew he would never lace his boots again or shell walnuts or push his hair out of his eyes. He would never marry a Forest girl. He would never breathe again. She put a hand on his chest. It was still warm, but not with life.

Enna shouted at the sky. She had done this. She had not talked him out of using the fire on the battlefield, and she had pretended to be the fire-witch to distract the Tiran instead of rushing out to stop him. When she pulled her hand away from his chest, she brushed across something round and long. The vellum.

She jerked the thing free from his tunic. The oiled cloth wrapped around it was blackened and warm, and it smelled greasy and dirty like a garbage fire. Her throat constricted against a sob, and her fist tightened around the cloth. The parchment inside crackled a little, the noise of a secret.

None of it made sense, why he would burn his sister, and suddenly hate the city dwellers, and just as suddenly join with the king to fight Tira. And then to burn with such abandon, even to his death. The cloth trembled in her hand. Would it explain why Leifer had changed? Whatever intelligence was

inside had helped turn back the invaders today, but did it also demand the wielder's life? Did Leifer really have to die?

Enna peeled back the cloth. The vellum was white as bone, rolled tightly, and tied with a string. She lifted it out carefully, but the string had burned, and it dropped away in pieces. The vellum unrolled before her eyes.

She jerked back, afraid to have such a thing open to her. Then she took a breath and nodded to herself. She had to know what had happened to Leifer, why he had ended this way. She read carefully at first, trying to make out the many unfamiliar words and understand the tight, sloping script and bleeding ink. Then she read fast, too fast to understand it all at once.

I, a woman of the River, keep brief record of the greatest power our people have seen—how to shape fire from the heat of the living, how to pull heat from the air and give it life inside fuel. How to hear the heat, how to bring it inside myself, form it into flame, and set it free . . .

Enna closed her eyes, and she could see the black ink strokes of the text flaming orange against her lids, as though the letters were branded behind her eyes. The idea of the knowledge burned impatiently against the strikes of raindrops on her neck and hands. She opened her eyes and the world seemed different, the colors brighter, everything pulsing with heat and life.

"Fire," she said.

The tip of her tongue warmed. Beside her, a stalk of downed wheat smoked in the rain.

Part Two



Warrior

Chapter 6

That night the rain stopped suddenly, leaving behind low, sluggish clouds to mix with the smoke. After the sun fell, the sky was black.

Enna sat on the ground beside Leifer's body far into the evening. Men patrolled the field, searching for wounded to take to nearby Ostekin. They glanced at Leifer's scorched remains and quickly passed on. Enna wrapped the vellum back in its cloth and slipped it inside her tunic. Her thoughts hunted after the words she had read, sought to catch them, cut them open, and understand.

Every living thing gives off heat, the vellum had said. *That is the key. I believe I was born with the ability to be a fire-speaker, though I did not know it until I was taught to feel that heat. Now it is so real, I wonder if I can see the pale yellow heat that trails from animals, people, plants, I wonder if I can hear the heat find me, tap against my skin, beg to be made into fire. Before it is pulled apart in the cruel, cold air, heat remembers that it was once a part of something living, and it seeks to be so again.*

After nightfall, men began to place the bodies of the slain into piles. Dumbly, Enna still sat on the ground and watched, her hand on Leifer's chest. When men tried to take Leifer, Enna roused.

"He's my brother," she said. "I will."

She grabbed his ankles and dragged him to the nearest heap of corpses. He was so blackened, Enna was afraid at first that he might break apart like a burned-out log and collapse into ash. But he was still strong.

"Enna." Isi stood by, her face barely recognizable in the night. "Leifer should be buried in honor. He was a hero today."

Behind her, Geric and three captains lifted the king's body into the back of the wagon, to be taken to the royal tombs in the capital. She could hear Isi's uneven breath, torn from sobbing for the king and the day. Enna felt the vellum scratch under her tunic, and she put a self-conscious hand to her chest. Standing before Isi, the words of the vellum churning in her mind, reminded her she had acted rashly. Perhaps Isi would not approve. Now was

not the time to tell her. She looked at her brother's body sprawled on the ground.

"Leifer wouldn't want to be in cold earth," said Enna. "He should be burned."

Isi squeezed her shoulder and returned to Geric.

Once you are aware of the heat loose in the air, the vellum had said, *it becomes aware of you. Take it, form it into flame, send the flame into something dead so that it, too, can live again. Trees grow in the heat of life. Deadwood remembers that life. Make heat flame, send it into the deadwood, let what once was tree live again as fire.*

Men in a wagon brought wood from Ostekin. Everything under the sky was soaked and miserable. They stacked the wood around the mound of bodies and, hunching over flint and kindling, began to try to coax a flame.

Enna closed her eyes. The air was damp and clung to her lungs as she drew it in. On the skin of her face and hands, she thought she felt the air a little heavier, a little more profound. A little warmer. Focusing on the touch of that air, she followed it back to its source—the men. She opened her eyes. Yes, there, she had known the men were there by the heat that had left them, slithered through the air, and found her skin. The more she focused on the heat, the more sensitive her skin was to its touch. And the strands of heat that found her stayed near.

To make heat into fire, you must draw it inside you. I was never aware of that small, hollow place inside my chest until I was taught to feel it, expand it, fill it with heat. If you are one who might have the ability, you can feel that place, too. Gather the heat touching your skin, then draw it in. Inside a living person, heat can become flame. Do not let it stay and burn you. Send it out into something dead, and the heat becomes live fire.

Enna felt the warmth on her skin and listened to all around her. She heard a man curse. The rustling of shaved wood. The snap of rubbing flint. A hiss, a flash, a sigh. She could almost feel the first word of fire sitting inside her, behind her eyes, on her tongue, while the man struggled to ignite even a tiny flame. She knew she could help the men light their fires, she could bestow all the dead piled there with the brief life of fire. This last gift for Leifer. The heat near her began to move as if in anticipation.

"Just this once," she whispered, "for Leifer."

With a thought, she gathered in the heat she had been feeling, the lost heat from the frustrated men crouched over their kindling, the drifting heat

from the wet, green grasses and the roots of wheat stalks. She was afraid the next part would prove too difficult, but as soon as she willed it to enter, the heat came into her, into a place in her chest. She felt the place expand. Her eyes lifted open with the rush of life and the sting of heat. *Get it out*, was the immediate need. Quickly, she sent the transformed heat tearing through the air and into the nearest fuel.

A little heap of wood shavings burst into flame. The soldier working at it wiped his brow, relieved. Others left their own piles and went to him, patting him on the back, saying, "Well done, you got it. Didn't think we'd get anything going in this damp."

Enna looked over all the stacked wood, at the clothes of the dead soldiers, at all the fuel that she could inject with heat and bring back into a brief, blazing life. But she did not have to look far for reasons not to. There on the mound, one arm flung over his face, lay Leifer.

Enna whispered, "That's all, Leifer. I'll never burn again."

Soldiers gathered, lighting sticks in the fire Enna had begun, distributing the flames to the stacked wood around that mound and other mounds. The fires grew taller, and the men stepped back. No one wanted to smell the burning-meat odor of their dead. Someone started to sing, and the living men gathered in to one another and joined with dissonant voices. As the fire bit into the rough wood and ate up the clothing, it growled and crackled and breathed, so that Enna imagined it sang harmony to the men's voices.

"Up, up, up with your glass," they sang, "the man has fallen down. Lift up, up, up your last glass, lift up for the downed, downed man."

It was a rough tavern song, but one they all knew. Enna liked it more the more they sang. The rhythm clipped, the words rolled over each sound, and some men pumped their arms as though they toasted the dead. It reminded her that there was still living to be done.

She watched the flames, but her focus slipped past them to the dead bodies, an arm tucked there, a face blackened in smoke, a tunic eaten through. The last of Leifer in this world, made brilliantly hot and bright and alive. She walked away before the fire burned out, before all that was left was ash.

Two weeks after the battle of Ostekin Fields, Enna walked back to the Forest. She felt uneasy, as though Leifer were at home waiting for her, hungry, unable to make a stew without her help. She knew it was not true,

but she told Isi, “I just have to go see that he’s not there, and make sure the chickens are all right.”

She traveled in the company of a dozen Forest boys, most of whom were needed more at home than on the battlefront and some of whom now stared about with wide eyes and wizened brows, unready as they were to have seen what a war really was. Enna had thought Finn would be one of the returning, but he surprised her.

“Send a message to my ma, if you can—I’m staying with the prince,” and he walked swiftly back to his hundred-band camp.

Enna thought how Finn was changing, how everything was.

Faintly, she could feel the heat of her traveling companions as they walked beside her and the living plants beneath her feet. A few days into the journey, her sense of their heat was unmistakable. At night she felt uncomfortable around the fires, instead sleeping several paces beyond the others on the edge of the firelight. Even from there, she could sense its delicate heat weave through air to touch her skin.

When they passed under the Forest canopy, she was surprised by how thick the air was with the warm emanations of plants and animals. Enna had never realized before just how much was growing around her, how much life filled up every inch. She entered her empty little house, sat on her cot, and stared at the wood grain of the floor. She refused to look at the door, fighting a ridiculous hope that any moment her brother could come through it. Her old restlessness was so profound now that it was almost audible, a discontented buzzing that could compete with the crickets.

Enna spent much of that night with open eyes, wondering how Leifer had slept so soundly. How could he not lie awake, constantly marveling at the ribbons of heat that seeped out of trees and animals and through the cracks in the walls? Her awareness of it felt like a last link to Leifer. As she paid closer attention, her sense of the heat became more distinct. She thought she could tell the difference between heat from an animal, a tree, a fern. Everywhere, things were alive, awake, and growing. The heat tickled her skin and felt as pleasant as baking bread smells.

The hearth was cold. She stubbornly refused to light a fire, even with flint.

In the morning she shut the house up tight and made Doda a present of half of her egg layers in exchange for looking after the hens and the goat indefinitely. By the next week’s end, Enna was back in Ostekin. She greeted

the west gate sentries and headed to the councilman's house where Geric had set up headquarters.

Up the main road a bit, she thought she saw Isi dressed plainly with her hair in a scarf as though out for a walk. Two young soldiers, clearly agitated about something, stopped her and began speaking with energy. Enna picked up her pace.

"I'm sorry, I don't think that's a very fair request," Enna heard Isi say. "You should speak to your captain. . . ."

"No, I'm telling you," one of the soldiers said. "My brother died out on that field, and I'm not going to just sit here and wait until my captain says I can fight again."

"That's right." The other soldier stepped in closer, pointing his finger at Isi. "And if you don't . . . "

"What do you mean, threatening the yellow lady?" Enna reached the group and stepped between Isi and the soldiers, shoving their chests until they backed up. "What, are you some Tiran pig dressed Bayern?"

The soldiers stiffened. "We're just saying what's true."

"Oh, you're just humming to hear the pretty noise. Get out of here, go on. If I hear you disrespecting our princess again, I'll whip your hide so you'd think I was your own ma."

The soldiers hesitated.

"Did you hear me, little boys?" said Enna. "Go on!"

They turned and walked swiftly away.

Isi sighed. "Those poor boys are grieving and don't know what to do about it."

"I do. Give the word and I'll flog them for you."

Isi laughed briefly and bowed her head. "I know you will, but I don't think it'll be necessary. This time." She met her eyes. "You make me feel safe, Enna. I'm so glad you're back."

Enna inhaled against an uncomfortable feeling, as though she had dreamed she had hurt Isi and was only now remembering. *The fire. I haven't told her.* She realized now that part of the reason she left Ostekin so soon after the battle was to avoid telling her friend that she had read the vellum. She did not want Isi to look at her as Enna had looked at Leifer, wondering how much of what he did was really Leifer, how much was fire, and always feeling on edge, waiting for him to break and flames to rise. *You make me feel safe*, Isi had said. How could Enna betray that?

“What’s wrong?” asked Isi.

“I, nothing. I’m glad I’m back, too. How can I help you, Isi? I’d like to be useful, if I can.”

“You’re still my maiden.”

“Yes, that’s something,” said Enna. “Well then, I’ll be the most valiant queen’s maiden in Bayern history.”

Isi shook her head. “Queen. For my first sixteen years, my mother was the queen, and when I came to Bayern there had been no queen for a decade. Now suddenly I’m the queen. I’m still not used to it.”

“I don’t think most people are. Just now when I arrived, I said to the sentries, ‘Where’s the princess, or the queen, rather?’ and they said, ‘You mean the yellow lady?’”

“I’m not surprised.” Isi patted the scarf that hid her hair. “I know I stand out too much with my hair so long and yellow as well, but I just can’t bring myself to cut it.”

“Cut it?” said Enna. “No, you can’t. It’s part of who you are.”

Isi smiled and entered the councilman’s house, but Enna paused at the door. She turned to face southeast, the direction of the kingdom of Tira and the direction of Eylbold, the closest Bayern town Tira had taken. She felt the hairs on her arms rise. They were so close. So close that she imagined she could close her eyes and feel her way southeast just by the heat of their bodies. The feeling twisted her stomach.

Enna turned her back on the south and followed Isi inside to prepare for a war council, one of many that autumn. The leaves turned and pinecones fell, and there were councils and meetings and strategies, unexpected clashes with Tiran troops and dozens of Tiran prisoners. And then the weather turned decisively toward winter. The skirmishes between Bayern and Tira slowed and then stopped like tree sap in the cold. Tira had taken two more border towns but had launched no great battles, and now both sides seemed content to wait out the winter and strike again in the thaw of spring.

And Enna grew restless.

One evening she sat in the main room of the councilman’s house, darning an apron to keep her hands busy. Isi was with Geric somewhere, and it had been a week since the queen’s maiden was needed for anything more than being a friend. She found herself staring southeast again, toward Eylbold. A mild winter storm pushed on the shutters, thrumming the wood against the

house, noises that made Enna feel as though she were inside a drum. She pricked her finger with the needle and angrily sucked away the drop of blood.

"Lovely girls you have here."

The careful, dry accent put ice in her stomach even before she knew who had spoken. Through the room three soldiers escorted a bound Tiran prisoner. He caught her eyes and sneered. "Glad to see there will be something lovely for Tira in this dismal country."

A soldier shoved him roughly, and they left through the back of the house.

Enna sat glaring at the still swinging door, wishing she had had something burning and clever to say back. Her anger at the prisoner and her lack of response and her own uselessness lately while all of Tira sat snuggly on Bayern land heated her face and sped up her breath. The heat pouring from the hearth fire wrapped around her ankles and rose to her neck. The heat those soldiers had left behind shoved against her skin. It swathed her like hot hands over her face. The room seemed to dim, and she rubbed her eyes and wondered if she was seeing clearly.

Inside her chest, that place she had filled with heat the day Leifer died began to pulse expectantly, and Enna felt a pleasant, slippery desire to comply. Get rid of all the clinging heat, draw it tight into that space, and make just one tiny fire. . . .

Enna bolted upright, grabbed her cloak from its peg, and walked out of the house and into a cold burst of wind. Immediately the heat left her, and she sighed. So strong an impulse to make another fire had never taunted her before. She felt her limbs shiver, and she imagined it was not just the sudden cold.

The wind pushed against her back, so she walked with it, feeling its pressure move her toward the edge of camp. She felt better, but she did not want to go back into that house just yet to wait while loose scraps of heat from people and from fires stuck to her again.

Suddenly she remembered what Leifer had said when she had asked him if he could stop. *You don't understand if you ask me that question. I have to use it.*

Had he tried to resist and discovered that eventually the fire would have its way? Enna felt her muscles tighten at the prospect of a challenge. She

had not anticipated that the fire could be so forceful, but now that she knew, she was even more determined to overcome.

The town was mildly busy with the activity of an early winter evening. Every building was occupied with captains and ministers and blacksmiths and tanners. On both sides of the town wall, brown tents pooled in groups under individual hundred-band banners. There was no place for her to be alone.

She stopped at the stables near the east gates and had a stable-hand saddle for her a sweet gray mare named Merry. Being a queen's maiden did have some advantages.

She had nowhere in particular to go, so she gave Merry free rein and let the wind whip at her skin. The sky kept to itself, cloudy and dim. The low hills were nearly colorless and clenched with a hard crust of snow. The absence of life was exhilarating, and Enna squeezed Merry's middle a little tighter and rode on.

The sun lowered faster than she had expected, and the land filled with that ghostly gray light that could slip into black without warning. She turned the mare back northwest, fairly sure that was where she had left Ostekin, and started a trot back.

Minutes later, the breeze was pushed aside by a wind from the north, and this one brought snow.

Gusts of wet wind pushed her around and washed the horizon in streaks of gray. Enna tied the ends of her headscarf under her chin for warmth. The sun had left completely now, and the snow seemed endless. She could see no farther than a few paces in any direction. Enna shook her head at the bewildering, pale landscape and banged her fist on the saddle.

"Curse you, Enna," she said with chattering teeth. "I curse you up and down, stupid girl."

There was no point in trying to find her way in this weather. She walked Merry away from the wind, scanning for shelter. The night deepened.

Sometime later, she brushed snowflakes from her eyelashes and squinted into the storm at a point of orange. Fire. She could not feel its heat from there, disrupted by snow and wind. Cautiously she moved closer, hoping to catch sight of any person before she was seen herself. If it were not for the wind, she was sure she could have already felt their heat. Closer, she spotted a tent and three horses in a curve of hill protected by a few scrub trees. A camp. But of whom? Closer. A figure hunched up against the wind

moved around the perimeter of the camp. A guard. She waited until he walked to the far side of the little camp, then she moved in closer still.

The tent was white. None of the tents of Ostekin were white. But perhaps, she hoped, perhaps the Bayern scouts used such. Then a man opened the tent flap and moved into the light of the fire. Pale hair. Blue jacket.

"Tiran," she whispered.

She kept her eyes on the man by the fire and slowly backed Merry away.

"Spy!"

A shout from beside her. She jerked the reins and tried to gallop away, but the guard had come upon her unawares, and he stood now at the mare's head, gripping her bridle. He yelled to his companions. The man at the fire leaped forward, and another emerged from the tent gripping a spear.

Enna wrenched at Merry's reins. The mare whinnied and lifted onto her back legs, but the guard did not let go. He pulled her closer to the camp. The other two were almost upon her.

For a moment, the wind was breathless. It created a pocket of stillness inside the constant howling. Enna could at last feel a band of heat from the fire, and wisps from the mare and the Tiran guard, touching her face and hands. Frantically she grabbed at it, pulled it inside her chest, felt the burn, and sent it tearing into the tent. In the flash of yellow light, the two running guards faltered and looked behind them by the tent for another foe. The guard's grip on Merry's bridle loosened. Enna booted the man in the head, steered Merry away from the camp, and kicked her into a gallop.

Chapter 7

Snow stung her eyes and cheeks. She could not hear anything but wind. Sometimes she looked behind her for pursuing horsemen, but soon the storm made it impossible to know which direction was behind.

She rode low, her face near Merry's neck, stunned as much by her heedless fire lighting as her near capture. Her hands were numb, her body ached. When at last the winds died and the sky cleared, Enna walked Merry until the distant fires of Ostekin directed her home. She entered its gates just after dawn.

Enna let a stable-hand help her dismount. When her feet touched earth, she gripped his shoulder and nearly crumpled to the ground.

"Long ride." He was looking over the mare's sweat-streaked neck with disapproval.

"I got lost," Enna said vaguely, and made for the town center. Walking on her own legs felt at once unbelievably refreshing and dreadfully painful.

She slowed her walk as she passed the councilman's house. Inside was her cot, and the idea of rest made her feel dreamy. Inside, too, was Isi. Enna imagined telling Isi at last about the vellum, and the uncomfortable heat last night when the prisoner made her angry, and her quickness in the snowstorm to use the fire to escape. Isi would probably understand, and she might even start working on how to erase what Enna had learned. Enna remembered now that Isi had not known of a way to erase such knowledge from Leifer but had wondered if those fire worshippers in Yasid might.

A door swung open to emit a messenger, and Enna caught sight of Isi sitting in the back room with Geric, deep in talk. No, it was not fair to burden Isi with this now. In comparison with war and the death of the king, Enna's concerns seemed a mild matter.

Instead, Enna turned from the town center and wove through the brown tents and roped-off fighting rings to find Finn. The army was organized by hundred-bands, the smaller villages and three Forest areas offering only one each, the larger towns supplying several. The hundred-bands camped together, so she followed the painted shields until she started seeing those

painted with twin pines—one green, one yellow. The yellow tree was meant to honor Isi, the yellow lady, for convincing the king to recognize the Forest boys as citizens and soldiers in the first place. But just then, Enna realized it looked like a tree aflame.

Finn sat at the mouth of a tent, attaching an iron head to his javelin. She felt suddenly nervous to confess to him her secret, though she felt she should tell someone. He had always been a good listener, and she had missed their closeness these last weeks.

Before Finn, a couple of Forest lads sparred in a rope circle. The chief of their hundred-band called out, "Watch the left side! Lift up your shield!"

"Hello, Finn."

Finn glanced up, and at seeing her, a painful smile tightened his mouth.

"Hello, Enna. I'm just about to spar."

She sat beside him. "We haven't spoken in a while, and I thought we'd —"

"Mm-hm," he said as though he had not heard her, then put down his javelin and stood.

"Oh," said Enna.

Finn ducked under the rope of the fighting ring without a look back. "I'll relieve one," he said to the fight master.

A short boy about Finn's age nodded, too out of breath to speak, and exited the ring. He smiled when he saw Enna and sat beside her.

"How's it, Razo?" she said. Despite her exhaustion and the slight trembling that still shook her deep inside, she could not help but smile whenever she saw Razo. His unkempt hair stood nearly straight on his head, and his expressive face could never hide his current mood, which generally seemed to be either amused or confused.

She waited for him to get back his speaking breath and watched Finn in the rope ring. He fought with great energy, rushing his opponent and knocking him to the ground. Once he looked back to see if Enna watched, then turned away again just as quickly.

"He's getting better," said Enna.

"Who, Finn? No question." Razo tried to wipe the sweat from his brow on her shoulder, and she shoved him away.

"He practice much?"

Razo nodded, wiping his face on his already filthy tunic. It left a brown smear. "The most. It's scary to face him. He looks like he's going to pound

you into the ground, and then afterwards you see he's not angry at all, just serious. Remember how he used to be?"

"Seems like the 'used to be' was only a few weeks ago," said Enna.

Finn was relentless and focused. Though his gestures seemed rough, his attacks were fierce, and Enna thought he looked natural swinging a sword.

"Why didn't you two ever . . . " Razo gestured back and forth from the fighting Finn to Enna at his side.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't be dumb, Enna-girl. I know there used to be something there."

"There was not, you dope. Finn and I've been good friends, but he never pursued me."

"Ah, get off," he said. "I pursued pretty, pretty Bettin from Sprucegrove to Longpines, and that didn't keep her from marrying that impostor Offo."

"Razo, we're talking about me and Finn. A snake and a hare."

"Does that look like a hare to you?"

Enna watched as Finn attacked a fresh opponent, hammering the boy's shield until he cried halt.

"He's . . . changing, isn't he? I don't know what to think of him."

"It's the war," Razo said matter-of-factly. "It's getting all of us, including you. Your forehead's always knotted up and worried now, like I haven't seen since I had you completely and utterly convinced that your hen had a crazy chicken disease."

Enna laughed. At the sound, Finn turned and looked. His opponent used the opening to throw himself against his shield, and Finn tumbled to the ground. Angrily, he stood and rushed in return, pounding his sword against the other's until the training master shouted, "Match!"

"I'll admit, I've never seen him like this," Enna continued. "Do you think he's just trying to . . . impress someone?"

"Absolutely," said Razo. "You know, Finn's got a girl now."

"Finn's got a what? What do you mean?"

Razo jerked his head toward a slim girl leaning against a fence post. She was completely absorbed in the sparring, half a smile forgotten on her lips.

"Hesel?" Enna said with unconcealed wonder. "Finn and Hesel?"

"So it would seem," said Razo.

"But, but, she's not even a Forest girl, and she's too skinny."

"She's Captain Monulf's niece, and not bad to look at, and a pretty good cook besides."

“Ha.” Enna smugly remembered seeing her once in the councilman’s house overcook a loaf of bread. “Pretty and a captain’s niece is scarcely a recipe for Finn’s true love.”

Razo gave her a toothy smile. “Are you jealous, then, Enna-girl?”

Enna glared back. “Don’t be daft, Razo. I’m just thinking that a town girl’s hardly what Finn needs.”

“Match,” said the fight master.

Finn knocked sword tips with his opponent in friendly dismissal and left the ring. Enna looked to where Hesel had been standing. She was gone, too.

A page tapped Enna’s shoulder and told her the yellow lady wanted her for council in the public building, and she stood to go.

“Come see us again,” said Razo. “When Finn’s in a better mood.”

“Wait,” she said. Razo turned and waited for her to speak. And she wanted to. Yesterday she had nearly lost control, and that frightened her. She needed to tell someone what was happening inside her, someone who would not judge, who could help. She did not want to bother Isi, and it seemed Finn was past his listening stage. Could she tell Razo?

His face was young and boyish, but he had an arrowhead-shaped scar on one cheek and another peering out from the neck of his tunic. Those had been frightening injuries, but she remembered he had never been concerned about them. When he first received his javelin and shield from the king, he had wept openly. He was the least threatening, most ridiculous, and impossibly likable person she knew. So much like Leifer.

“I, uh, I’ll see you around,” was all she could say.

Razo snorted. “Sure.” He started to leave, then turned back to her. “Enna, don’t you breathe a word to Offo on what I said about Bettin. I know I’m hopeless, but I’ll never love a soul besides Bettin and I’ll die alone.”

She sighed. “Your head’s all full of silliness, saying things like ‘I’ll die alone.’ You and Finn, you’re still just little boys.”

The public building was a single-story, one-room structure with the only glass windows in the town, and today it was surrounded by soldiers. The door ward let her pass. Inside, several small tables sat touching to form a larger, oddly rectangular one in the center of the room. Geric, Isi, Thiaddag the prime minister, and the two chief captains in the region, Talone and Monulf, sat at the table. Several other captains stood behind them. Isi and Talone were conversing quietly. Enna remembered that they were compatriots, Talone having accompanied Isi on her journey from her birth

kingdom of Kildenree. He had stayed in Bayern as her personal protector and, later, as the captain of Bayern's Own, the king's personal hundred-band.

When Enna approached, Talone nodded to her and took his seat by Monulf.

"What's happening?" asked Enna.

"War council with Tira," said Isi. "A messenger came from their camp at Eylbold yesterday morning. We're all a bit nervous. I could use you beside me."

"Yes, of course. Have you . . . are you all right?" Enna just then noticed how calm Isi looked. "You seem different."

"You noticed?" Isi smiled. "I must normally be pretty agitated. A physician gave me a rather bitter tea. It makes me drowsy, but at least I slept last night. And it dulls me, I guess. I hear most of the news that comes to me on scraps of wind, but not so loudly. I didn't know you had entered the room until just before I saw you."

Hoofbeats and voices outside quieted the room. Everyone seemed to sit up a little straighter. Enna took her place standing behind Isi's chair. It was her usual position and a place of honor, but exhaustion made her legs feel loose, and she grabbed the back of Isi's chair for support. Moments later, the Tiran delegation entered. Most wore blue jackets and leather piecemeal vests and carried short spears. Enna stared at them openly, glaring whenever one caught her eye. The leader seemed to be a gray-haired captain named Tiedan. Enna had heard that the Tiran royalty did not enter battle, and their women stayed home.

After stiff formalities, Tiedan and Geric spoke almost exclusively, and Enna wondered why everyone else was needed there at all. She found herself not paying much attention to the talk, instead looking over the Tiran men and thinking about the battle of Ostekin Fields, of the soldiers who had been killed, of Leifer. A log in the hearth cracked, a noise as loud and distinct as a word. Enna felt herself begin to sweat.

Geric was speaking. "I think it wise to remember that this is not just an issue of land. It's people. The people you attacked in those villages and towns are Bayern."

"For now," said Tiedan. "Once they were Tiran. They can be again."

"You don't know that." Geric rubbed his eyes. "You say that, but you have no proof, nor does that fact live in the memories of my people."

Enna was not sure if the fierceness of Tiedan's speech meant he was angry or if it was just the effect of his rigid, pronounced accent. "The facts reside in more than memories. The facts embed themselves in our very natures. Look at your people, all with dark hair, most with dark eyes. Farther south in Bayern the people begin to have lighter hair—almost like us."

"But Captain Tiedan, that doesn't mean—"

Tiedan interrupted Geric. "And how is it that we speak the same language? I hear that lands farther south and east speak barbaric tongues. Clearly Bayern was born from Tira."

Bayern born from Tira. The thought made Enna scowl. She narrowed her eyes at the captain called Tiedan and hoped he would notice.

"You make no sense, sir." Geric was fighting anger. "And even if we agreed that, yes, once long ago, before memory, our people were one, that doesn't justify your butchery of this people! In truth, it makes your aggression even more senseless."

Tiedan chuckled and then spoke in a low, growling voice. "Then how, pray tell us, sir, do you justify the butcheries your grandfathers committed against Tira?"

Enna had a sudden and powerful conviction that she could set the room on fire. All the deadwood of the walls, tables, and floors would burn beautifully. All those living bodies and the hearth fire were just oozing heat into the room. She could with a thought bring the heat inside her, feel it change, and thrust it out again. The realization made her shiver.

She took a deep breath and focused on the cool sounds of a winter breeze whistling in the chimney. How could such a thought enter her mind?

"If this is just about revenge," said Geric, "then feel fulfilled and go home. You've killed the king, you've killed a goodly number of Bayern soldiers. Those who attacked you in the past are dead, and now so are many of their children. Let it end here."

Enna wiped her brow. All those people in one small space, all generating heat. Isi shifted in her chair. Enna noticed that Isi had wrapped her yellow hair in a Forest woman's headscarf, and her face was down. Many times Geric had begged Isi not to draw attention, afraid as he was that the Tiran would recognize her as the wind worker of the first battle and target her. Enna squeezed Isi's shoulder. Isi reached up and touched Enna's hand. Her cool fingers felt comforting and familiar.

“If your only solution for peace is keeping the towns you’ve taken,” Geric was saying, “then I can’t accept. We won’t abandon our people. We’re willing to discuss compromise, but ultimately it must include peace for all of Bayern.”

“Sileph, first rank. Allow me a question, sir.” A new Tiran captain spoke up. His hair was the lighter brown of lowland soil, his aspect confident but unassuming. He spoke properly, but with a casual arrogance, as though he knew he would not be denied. Tiedan acknowledged his request.

“King,” said Sileph, stating the title with neither courtesy nor mockery, “you say you are here for peace, and yet on the eve of these talks you send your witchery to attack a camp of Tiran men.”

There was a stir among the Bayern. Geric glanced at Talone and Monulf to see both offer slight shakes of their heads. Enna squinted at the soldier called Sileph. Had he been among the three last night in the storm? Even if he had, surely he could not know her face.

“We know nothing,” Geric said, cutting through noise, “we know nothing of attacks last night. If they happened, they were not of our people.”

“Come now, King,” said Sileph. “Those at the first battle of Ostekin Field reported fire workers. They set fire to the men’s clothing. The ground around them flamed.” He turned and looked directly at Enna. She blinked in surprise and resisted taking a step backward. “Perhaps the women, since you see fit to include them in war councils, would care to explain.”

“No need,” said Geric. “I can tell you. We’d a man with fire talents, but he was killed in that battle. Have you seen fire used in the skirmishes this autumn? He’s dead, and no other works fire.”

Sileph did not give up. “I have heard tale of fire-witches from the south, in the kingdom called Yasid. Is Bayern in league with the desert dwellers to crush Tira?”

Isi looked up, but Geric answered. “I know nothing of fire-witches in Yasid.”

“Let the woman speak,” said Sileph.

At first Enna thought Sileph meant for Isi to speak, but his gaze did not leave her own face. She let go of Isi’s chair and stood straighter, temper flashing in her chest. Silence followed Sileph’s words; then Geric said her name gently.

“The king speaks true,” she said, relishing her Forest accent, slurring her words more than usual just to contrast with the Tiran’s careful speech.

“Your boys thought we women conjured the fire, but we just watched atop the hill. Leifer, the fire worker, he stood in the midst of you. Then he burned himself up. I saw the body.” She almost choked on emotion then, but she stayed cool and was proud of herself.

“And the others?” He seemed to take her in wholly, not acknowledging any other person in the room.

“I’ve never seen or heard of a Yasid fire-witch in Bayern. Leifer’s dead, and he taught no one his art. Of that I’m certain.” She smiled at how deftly she avoided an outright lie.

Sileph stared at her a moment longer, and she felt her face heat under his gaze. Then he nodded once and stepped back to his position behind Tiedan.

The men finished their talking, accomplishing little but an agreed standstill for the winter, and the council broke up. Enna sighed and stretched as the Tiran captains left the room. One looked at her disapprovingly. She returned his look with a saucy tip of her head. Sileph, the first rank captain, caught sight of her and looked down, smiling. He was a handsome man, more so than any she had ever known. Indeed, she had never given much thought to what made a man handsome, but looking at him, she was sure she understood.

When he glanced up again, she smiled back boldly.

As soon as the last Tiran left, the Bayern breathed out and began to talk. The council would continue, and Enna felt panicked at having to stay in that room any longer. The sounds of the departing Tiran horses felt like blows to her belly. There seemed to be no air to breathe in the heat. Quickly she ducked out of the door and onto the street.

She could see the last Tiran horseman just leaving the town gates, and impulse bade her follow and do . . . something, hurt them, chase them out of Bayern. The place in her chest throbbed, and her skin felt feverish and raw. She took a breath and turned away, allowing the cool winter air to soak into her, a snaking breeze to push the heat away.

When she reentered the building, Prime Minister Thiaddag was pounding a javelin against the wood floor. “Captains, ministers, ladies, quiet for the king.”

Enna sat beside Isi in a vacated chair and listened to the ensuing discussion. Geric brought up each point dealt with in the meeting and asked the Bayern captains if he had done right. Most of the men brandished their javelins, some thumping the ends on the wooden floor to mark passionate

assent. Whenever some gave to inarticulate murmuring, the murmurers were asked to speak their mind, and their dissatisfaction was discussed and resolved.

The fire crackled louder, it seemed to Enna, than the men spoke. An hour crawled by, and the heat of the room clung to her skin. But though her vision tilted a little, and the heat began to scratch, she felt calm. She looked at the fields out the window masked in snow and listened to the wind humming in the chimney, and no urge to burn bothered her thoughts.

The council voted to wait out the winter and not attack the taken towns. The king and queen were to return to the capital to oversee recruiting, supplies, and civic peace. Last, they chose a captain to lead training, defending, and spying from Ostekin. For Talone, the javelins waved. Monulf inclined his head in agreement. Monulf was the senior captain, but he had led the assault at Ostekin Fields, so under his leadership the king had been killed. This post required one untainted by such a defeat.

At one point, Talone said, "Though the best scout we could have is leaving us for the capital."

"I can't," said Isi. "I'm unreliable of late. I can't focus on what I hear."

Talone nodded respectfully. Enna shook her head. It was a shame that in a war, with two nations dangling in the balance, Isi was not able to use her gift.

Before the council broke up, Geric turned to Enna. "Have you anything to add, queen's maiden?"

Enna blinked in surprise, but one thought did push forward. "Actually, I have heard the people in camp talking about an augury. Many are doing their own, but shouldn't we conduct a war augury?"

"Yes," said one of the captains in agreement. "We should council with fate to see if we fight in vain or can sacrifice our lives with the good assurance of victory."

The thumping of javelins sounded like the heavy footfalls of fate, though Enna did not know why she perceived it so.

"The council's in agreement," said Thiaddag. "Let the king pronounce the augury."

Geric turned to Monulf. "Sir, I've never led such an exercise. I allot this to you."

Monulf inclined his head. "A combat of countries, man versus man, is the traditional war augury. There are healthy Tiran prisoners in this camp. I'll

ask one to volunteer for combat unknown. He'll sleep this night on a mattress and eat with me. Tomorrow I'll give him his own weapons and pitch him in a death match against one of our own—also a volunteer. The results will give us a glimpse of our future against Tira."

"Captains, ministers, women, speak not of this until the morrow," said Thiaddag, "as foreknowledge for the fighters will tamper with the outcome. We are released from council."

The men were quiet as they left the public house. Enna felt her mouth go dry. She had thought an augury might show an encouraging sign, something to get them all through this winter. She had not considered that a war augury would require someone to die.

Though the captains gave no details, it seemed the entire camp felt the new tension. Every night for the two months that she had slept under a south-facing window in the councilman's house, Enna had heard men's jocular voices intoning tavern songs or men's solemn voices singing lost love and death songs. That night, silence. In the stillness, the hungry, crackling sound of fires wafted from the camp through her window. To Enna, it seemed that the sound itself could ignite the wooden shutters.

Chapter 8

At dawn, men were already gathering around the town square. Everyone was fully armed. Monulf and another man drove stakes into the hard earth and made a rope ring. When the soldiers saw it, they murmured to one another.

Enna accompanied Isi and Geric to the rope through a mob of soldiers who occasionally patted Geric on the back or touched Isi's loose-hanging hair. They passed Hesel in the crowd, and Enna felt her face twist into a scowl. No, the girl was definitely not worthy of Finn. She had no substance—all face and hair and bright eyes.

At last they broke through the crowd to face the empty ring, and Enna took a breath, feeling suffocated by the heat of all those people.

"I'm nervous," Enna said to Isi, holding a hand on her stomach. "This all feels so big."

"Too big." Isi frowned. "I don't like it. We should do it in private. That way if our Bayern man dies, the army won't know, and it won't get them down with ideas that we're doomed to lose the war."

"What difference would that make?" said Enna. "The result'll be the same no matter how many people see. Don't you believe the augury foretells the truth?"

"Well, no."

"Oh," said Enna. She had never met anyone who doubted the signs all around them. Since she was a baby, her mother had taught her to predict the weather by the flight of wild geese or the harshness of coming winter by the movement of bumblebees. Perhaps such things had power only in Bayern, so Isi was never taught. But Enna looked at the rope ring, felt her stomach harden and freeze, and had no doubts. This augury was unlike anything her mother had shown her. It meant the life of at least one person today and the fate of their kingdom in the future.

Monulf entered the arena and held up his hands for silence. He turned around slowly, as though he meant to meet eyes with every observer. At last he spoke. "Who among us will enter this ring and represent us all?"

Perhaps thinking it no more than an exercise to rouse loyalty and energy, hundreds of soldiers raised their javelins and hollered, “I will! I will!” But others took him quite seriously and pushed their way toward the ring. One young man rolled under the rope before any other. He stood, straightened his shield bearing two trees, and lifted his javelin.

“No, no,” said Enna.

“I will,” said Finn.

Isi gripped Enna’s arm. “Oh, Finn,” she said quietly.

He looked as calm as he ever did coring apples or leading a wagon into market-square. The weapons did not fit him. Clearly his sword was not his own, the belt hanging low on his hips and sword point dangling near the ground. His expression was his same, soft expression that Enna knew. She almost expected him to duck his head and break out into one of his huge, bashful grins. But Razo was right—there was something more serious in him now. Tighter lips, perhaps, or a line across his brow. But she knew for all his seriousness that he was not the ideal champion of Bayern. Most likely the first time a sword hilt touched his hand was the day he joined Geric’s camp for the battle of Ostekin Fields.

Monulf raised Finn’s hand and said to the crowd, “This boy is Bayern. Now bring in Tira.”

Guards led a blue-coated man into the ring. He wore a leather helmet, and the tips of hair escaping its hold were a lighter color than most Bayern. He carried a sword, an unpainted square shield, and a short spear. Enna was relieved to see that Finn was taller than the prisoner and a little broader, too. But the Tiran was older by perhaps ten years. He moved with a ruthless grace, and his expression was hard with calm desperation. She had no doubt he meant to kill Finn as quickly as he could.

At the sight of the Tiran, the crowd erupted into a deafening cheer, beginning to understand what this match meant. Monulf held his fist in the air to command silence. The outer rings of the crowd took longer to quiet. Soldiers were climbing on one another’s shoulders and on top of wagons, barrels, and nearby roofs to see the match. Four of the king’s guard held large shields in a defensive position between the king’s party and the rope, and Enna stood on her toes to get a better view. The opponents faced each other, circling slowly, each clutching his javelin or spear. In the quiet, Enna could hear their boots scrape against the earth. Monulf backed out of the ring, his fist still in the air.

“To predict the future of our war, combat to the death!”

He dropped his hand. The crowd reclaimed their cheers.

The Tiran was the first to move. He looked at Monulf as if expecting more instruction. Then with his eyes still averted he threw the spear. Finn deflected it with his shield. He moved forward quickly, stabbing at the Tiran with his javelin, making wide, swinging cuts. The Tiran held him off with his sword. Finn swiped upward, caught the Tiran’s shield with his javelin tip, and tore it out of his hand. The crowd cheered. But in the next move, the Tiran dodged a javelin thrust, grabbed the haft, and pulled it out of Finn’s hand. It clattered to the ground.

Now both were left to their swords.

Again the Tiran attacked first, and Finn met him in the center. In the uproar, Enna could not hear their swords meet. She could feel the crowd’s emotion through the noise—anger, frustration, excitement, dread. Her own heart yelled back while her stomach cringed away.

Finn returned the attack, battering at his opponent’s sword as though trying to break his arm. The Tiran jabbed from underneath, and Finn jumped back to keep from being skewered in the belly. Now Finn was on the defensive, backing away from the attack, defending with his shield. The Tiran’s sword caught him on the leg, and Finn opened his mouth in a silent cry of pain. Quickly he dropped to one knee, rolled out of the way, and turned around to meet sword against sword.

Enna felt helpless. When had the world turned so grave? The Tiran struck Finn’s shield with a force that knocked it from his arm, and Enna could not help but cry out. She felt as though she were tied up and being made to watch while her country fell. Enna saw Geric frown, but she knew he would let this go to the finish and accept the results. Isi bowed her head, her eyes closed. Apparently she heard enough from the wind that she did not want to see the action as well.

Please. Enna thought. *Please, Finn.*

The Tiran combated with the fierceness of a dying man, growling and spitting. Finn’s face was nearly without expression. He bled a little from his knee and from his bare arm where his shield once sat. His chest heaved with the effort of dodging blows, yet he still attacked relentlessly.

He’s persistent, Enna thought. She had a sudden memory of Finn visiting her home just after the death of her mother. A chicken had broken loose from the coop, and Enna had been too grieved to seek it out. Finn had

scoured the Forest and returned hours later, carrying just a clump of feathers in both outstretched hands. He had cried for the chicken. No, Enna realized, he had cried for her, for having to bring her a corpse so soon after her mother's death, for failing her, for the sorrow he imagined she would feel.

Finn continued to fight, but the crowd's calls were becoming anxious. They pleaded now instead of cheered. Some put their faces in their hands. In a quick and desperate move, Finn dropped to his knees under his opponent's swing and pricked him in the side. The crowd roared anew, but instead of doubling at the pain and allowing Finn to gain his feet again, the Tiran continued in his swing, met Finn's sword, and twisted it from his hand.

The crowd gasped. Finn dodged the following blow, but he was now completely disarmed. "No," came the mutters and cries from all sides, "no, not to us." Finn tried to leap for the fallen spear, but the Tiran rushed him and cut off contact. Finn was now close to the rope with very little room to run. The Tiran approached. Finn stood on the balls of his feet, his arms held out in a ready posture, his face deathly still. Blood dripped off his forearm and hit the cold ground. Enna thought she could detect its heat. Despite the noise of hundreds of men around her, she could hear her own heart keeping time in her ears. The beat seemed to chant, *Do something, do it, burn it, burn and burn.*

The Tiran lunged. Finn dropped to his back and kicked up into his foe's belly. The Tiran was pushed back but swung around quickly, his sword in a steady arc reaching, diving, circling around, and plunging toward Finn's chest.

Enna saw this last movement slowly, the plunge of the enemy's sword as though it were many swords, the outcome plain before it happened. The enemy on his feet, and Finn, sweet, harmless Finn, on his back on the ground. That was wrong. And all she had to do was pull and push. So simple. So small an action. And so much heat ready, hanging around her in the winter air. And in this slowed moment, reasons raced in her mind. She could help. But she should not. She had sworn that she would not. But if she did not, then Finn would die, and not only Finn, but the war would be lost, the augury spoken.

So she did. The heat was waiting around her. She pulled it into her chest with a small sigh of pain, then she sent it boiling into the Tiran's sword, up into the iron hilt.

The Tiran faltered, and the arc of his sword swerved, just grazing Finn's shoulder. Finn grabbed the Tiran's tunic and slammed his forehead into the man's nose. The Tiran dropped the sword and stumbled backward, blood spilling down his face. Still on the ground, Finn grabbed the fallen spear and hurled it. The iron tip flew through the soldier's side and sent him to the earth. The crowd went utterly quiet. Enna could hear the Tiran's labored breath. Finn stood, went to his fallen shield, and strapped it on his bleeding arm. He picked his sword off the ground. Slowly, without glory or fear, Finn walked to the fallen man, hefted his sword in the air, and brought it down across the Tiran's neck.

The crowd exploded with noise. Men embraced one another and wept, tore down the rope, and mauled Finn with kisses and thumps. Guards immediately circled the king's company, shields facing out to protect them in the riot, but even they were cheering.

Monulf was at Geric's side. "We're assured, sire. We fight as valiantly as that Forest lad, and we'll be victorious."

Enna was holding a hand to her mouth. She did not remember putting it there. Had she been holding back a scream? Or was she trying to hide? She looked back on the image of that last struggle again and again—Finn kicks, the Tiran turns, plunges, then falters. To others, surely it would just seem that his balance failed, that his sword missed, and that Finn seized the opportunity to attack. And in all that commotion, she believed no one but her would notice that the leather-wrapped hilt of the Tiran's sword let off a thin gray string of smoke.

Enna could not sigh in relief. She felt Isi staring at her.

"Enna, what just happened?"

"We . . . What do you mean? We won, Isi. Finn's all right."

"Enna." Isi shook her head. "Is there something going on that—"

"No." Enna looked down, exhaling slowly. She needed to be alone, time to think about what she had done, what she would do now. The moment she had interfered with the augury, Enna knew she had made a promise, a silent commitment to all of Bayern. It was not just Finn in that ring representing Bayern's armies—Enna had added her fire. Without her help, Finn would have been killed, Bayern's fate sealed. She felt that if she refused to fight now, she was giving her kingdom to Tira.

Enna slowly met Isi's eyes, tried not to blink, and prepared to lie to her best friend for the first time.

“There’s nothing,” she said. “Nothing’s going on, except Finn just won, so we should be happy. I should go and . . . and let you be alone with Geric.”

As soon as she broke free from the throng, Enna ran down the central road to the east end of town.

“What happened?” the sentries called to her as she passed.

“War augury—our boy beat the Tiran.”

The men on watch howled gleefully as she left them and ran out to the frozen fields where the ground sank away from the town’s view.

“You’ve done it now, Enna-girl.” She sat on the ground and leaned back to look at the sky, a winter blue spoiled with patches of hostile winter clouds. The sun against the white snow burned her eyes, and she blinked away stinging tears. Again and again, she went over the augury in her mind, Finn’s fall, her intervention. The omen was clear—with her help, Bayern’s armies would be victorious, and without, there was only defeat.

“Ahh,” she wailed at nothing, and stood and paced and pulled at her hair. It was wrong; she had done wrong. She had promised never to use the fire, and now she had lied to Isi. But Finn would have been killed and the outcome of the augury sealed. There had been no other choice.

She faced southeast. Tira. The taken towns. Lately she always knew where southeast was, even at night, even with eyes closed. She fancied she could sense the enemy in her land, a great hulking presence. Just by facing that direction, her new decision to fight still raw but real inside her, she felt everything slide and click into place—Leifer’s sacrifice, the vellum in her hands, the augury, all steps to bring her to this choice. She would save Bayern.

Chapter 9

Enna lay awake most of the night staring at the crossbeams of the councilman's house and thinking of Leifer. If she was to succeed, then she had to avoid his mistakes. She went over what things he must have done wrong—telling others, using fire against his sister in a moment of rash anger, then using too much all at once on the battlefield.

"All right, then," she whispered so low that she could barely hear herself. "I will never tell a soul, I'll never burn a living person, and I'll keep it small, just bits at a time. I swear, Leifer, I swear."

Enna hoped such caution meant she would not end up charred on a battlefield, but it also meant she could not fight as Leifer had. Remembering the Tiran tent in the snowstorm, Enna decided that stealth attacks might do just as well as a grand fire show. She would be the mouse that could bring down an oak tree, chewing one woody fiber at a time.

A woman beside her snorted gratingly. Enna smiled, imagining it was Hesel.

She spent all that day anxious, waiting for evening. Isi was busy with Geric, Razo and Finn with their hundred-band, and chores bored her when something so crucial was waiting. To pass the time, she battled with herself over what to do with the vellum. It was not safe hiding under her cot. She could not bury it—the ground was frozen, and besides, Leifer had found it under a fir tree. Perhaps long ago, someone like Enna had buried it to hide it, which meant that someone like Leifer could find it again. Enna did not want to commit the same error.

So Enna hid in a corner of the tanner's house, unstitched her hem, and sewed the vellum inside her skirt. She had read it so many times now that entire sentences entered her mind unbidden, but she did not know if she would need it again. She dared not destroy it or lose it, not until the war was over and her part in the augury fulfilled.

At sundown she made the ride to the nearest taken town—Eylbold.

The dark gray Merry was a ghost of the night landscape. A light snowfall from that morning had taken the icy edge from the air. It felt like a gentle winter, a sleepy winter.

"I won't be long," said Enna, tethering Merry to a tree. She wished she had a bond with this mare as Isi had with her horse. If only she could ask Merry to keep quiet, she could probably take her closer. It would be a real benefit to have an animal by her side and draw on all that life heat for her task.

Enna rubbed the mare's rabbit-soft nose regretfully and left her for the night.

The last scouting report said the Tiran camp sprawled from the edge of the northeast wood and into the taken Bayern town of Eylbold. The woods supplied good cover and a nice buffer between her escape route and the town, so she stayed in its moonshade, creeping from tree to tree. Intermittent patches of snow gave soft moans under her boot. She was grateful the night was not cold enough to freeze it, grateful to avoid crunching snow and that sound like a small beast eating, the noise of clumsy stealth.

She was aware of all the living around her. She could feel its heat—the trees, the sleeping animals in their arms or in holes in the ground. Even the frozen grass was still alive at its root, still emanating tiny strings of heat. Her sense of it was so much stronger than at first, and she knew she could draw on it at any moment. At first, the thought of at last giving rein to the fire was exciting.

Enna could feel the increase of heat before she saw the camp. Trees and plants let off so little in comparison, theirs a sleepy, measured life, a slow growth. But animals, and humans especially, gave off chunks of it, swirls and waves drifting off their bodies as though they had life to burn. And live fire was a powerful, steady source. So close to the men and fires of the camp, this edge of the wood throbbed with heat adrift.

She pulled her body against a fir and concentrated on drawing all that loose heat around her, readying herself to pull it inside. And hesitated. She closed her eyes, focused, and tried again. But her rapid breath seemed so loud, she could not focus on the push of the heat against her skin. Enna lowered her head and realized the excitement was gone, and her stomach moaned and twisted uncomfortably. She had resisted it for so long. That night in the snowstorm and at the augury, she had acted instinctively, to

save herself or Finn. Now actually making the choice to pull the heat inside her felt as impossible as looking over a cliff edge and making her body lean forward.

Then a noise like a snapping twig.

Enna clutched the tree to keep still. It could be soldiers moving in on her, or it could be a branch settling in the cold. She listened, holding very still, breathing into the neck of her cloak to mask the sign of her icy breath. No other noise.

Her heart leaping in her chest reminded her why she had ridden so far and what she still must do. From nearby she could hear the shuddering, hollow sound of wind against a tent. She watched it a few moments to see if she could detect any inhabitants—no one entered or left, no lantern lit it from the inside. It seemed a safe target. This time she held her breath and closed her eyes. The heat was so close, so willing. She let go of her fears.

She inhaled and spoke to the heat touching her skin with a thought, a sensation, an invitation to enter. Her eyes opened wide, her voice nearly escaped in an indrawn scream from the unbearable burn. Focusing on the space before her where the tent stood, she felt a release and heard an outburst of fire whipping against cloth. Men began to shout.

Then a whisk she thought might be an arrow. Enna dropped to the ground, scurried a distance on her hands and feet, then drew up in panic for a full run.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” she chanted to the mare as she mounted and set her at a gallop. By the time she left the Eylbold woods, no pursuer was in sight.

The ride back to Ostekin took her until dawn. It was a strange and long journey with nothing to fear or look forward to, the heat left behind. Everything seemed frozen. The mare’s hooves clipped against the icy earth, the mare’s breath made a silver mist, the air around her seemed frozen hard in the dark as though she could crack it with a wood wedge.

She, too, felt iced over. That fire she mustered left her momentarily numb to the heat she had become used to sensing. Strangest, though, was the hollowness inside her chest, and for some time she could feel nothing stronger than a vacant ache deeper than she could touch. But still clinging to her was the memory that the rush of indrawn heat and release into fire had felt . . . astonishing. Unbearable. Lovely.

She neared Ostekin's town wall in the dull, cloudy dawn. One of the sentries watching the east gate was Razo.

"Enna-girl, where've you been riding?"

"Scouting," she said.

Two of the sentries squinted at each other. Razo looked up, slack jawed and unassuming.

"Talone put you on scouting duty?"

"Could be." She still felt the vibration of the arrow like a cold spot on her neck. The long, freezing ride back made her feel she had lost part of herself somewhere in the woods, somewhere on the dark fields. She leaned over to stroke her mount's neck and felt as though only the mare were real in all the cold, dim world.

"Come on, now, mistress chicken-girl, you know you've got to answer a sentry's questions when entering the camp."

"Talone said that . . . " Enna feigned looking embarrassed, as if she had let slip too much. "Oh, I'm not supposed to say."

A stable-hand took Merry to the stables. Enna wrapped her arms around herself and walked into town, avoiding looking back at Razo. It was better to lie than to break her promise of secrecy. But just then, numb and dazed and lonely, the wisdom felt like cold comfort.

Enna slept all day, flopping and kicking, dreaming that she was exhausted but could not sleep. She woke when the afternoon light had a sheen of winter gold, as though promising that what came next was even better than day. Isi was sitting by her cot, holding a mug. The sight of her felt like such a relief, Enna felt her throat tighten as if she were holding back tears.

"Good morning," said Isi with a smile. She held out the mug. "Mint tea. It was warm an hour ago, but you might still like it."

Enna drank it all without a breath, her eyes on Isi's, wondering what Isi suspected and, if she asked, what Enna could tell her. Would she have to lie? Could she tell Isi and make her understand? The ashes of one little tent seemed feeble to her now, and the weight of the augury pressed her chest like a stone.

"Thank you," said Enna.

"Are you sick?"

Enna nodded. She did feel ill and tired, cold from the inside out. A rush of memory brushed down through her chest—the intake of heat, the release

of fire. She shivered.

Isi frowned. “The wind—it sees you a little differently. I thought you might be sick. You should rest. We’re riding back to the capital in three days.”

“I can’t go,” Enna said with conviction, before she had thought about it.

Isi pressed her hand to Enna’s forehead. “Are you terribly ill, then?”

“No.” Enna turned her head to look out the window. She could not leave Ostekin and the war front, not until she had done her part. Last night was not enough to win a war. “I can’t leave here so soon—not so soon after Leifer has died.”

“You need to stay because you are still mourning?”

Enna blinked only once before she said, “Yes.”

Lying to Isi felt like the start of something irreversible, as significant as reading the vellum or lighting the first fire. To assuage her guilt, Enna barely left Isi’s side for three days, aggressively protecting her from pushy ministers or soldiers, even when she knew it was not necessary.

It felt strange not to tell Isi everything. It seemed to Enna that her secret hung between them, always pushing them a little farther apart. Sometimes Enna was so conscious of the unspoken, she could not believe Isi did not know. She felt it keenly the morning she stood by Avlado and helped Isi mount, said good-bye, and watched Isi and Geric ride north. Then she turned around, back to the south. That very night she rode to Eylbold again, set another tent on fire, and fled into the morning.

Each afternoon the week after, Enna made a point to be in the main room of the councilman’s house when Talone gathered his scouts for the report. She swept the floor, oiled shutters, mended tunics. A few days after her second attack, she stooped over the hearth for some time, stoking the coals, her eyes on the fire, impatient with the lack of word about her exploits. Nothing was changing. Still the Tiran armies sat on Bayern land, waiting through winter.

Talone dismissed the men, and Enna swung around.

“What about Eylbold?” she asked.

Talone seemed surprised at her question, though his face rarely showed emotion. Some of the departing scouts stopped to look at Enna. Razo was among them.

“Why do you ask, maiden?” said Talone.

Enna shrugged. “They’re so close by. I just didn’t hear you mention them, and it seems like there’d be more information.”

“No word from Eylbold,” said Talone. “I thank you for your interest.”

Enna left the building with hot cheeks. No word. Was her burning accomplishing anything? That night she would return, and she must find a way inside.

This time she came upon Eylbold from the east and the open lands, thinking that the wood might now be well guarded. She left the mare in a copse of thorns and shrubs and crept across the frozen landscape. The moon was covered in cloud, and the only light in the world came from the campfires just over the next rolling field. She found herself looking forward to setting a fire in the night. The anticipation almost flooded out her fear.

She neared the edge of the encampment and saw the silhouettes of guards, spears in hand. At their backs the white tents seemed to glow like windows in the firelight. She stopped, lay down flat on the ground, and crawled closer. Her breath came from her throat in short gasps. Her hands tingled with cold and then grew numb against the frosty ground.

It was easy in the winter cold to pull the drifting camp heat out of the air, like stripping fibers from beaten flax. She also called on the roots of living things, asleep for the winter, and felt the curled-up body of some hibernating animal under the dirt. She would not pull heat directly from any creature, just gather what naturally left and wafted unused in the air.

Then, about a hundred paces from the nearest guard, Enna stopped. She looked carefully along the perimeter of tents. Guards every twenty paces. There was no way to enter the camp without being seen. She felt foolish for not having an alternate plan and, discouraged, started to crawl away.

Her limbs began to tremble and she collapsed, her face scraping the ground. Again she tried to pull herself along and again crumpled weakly. Her own breath was hot in her face, and she felt frustrated and helpless, the sensation of trying to run away in a dream but not moving at all.

What’s the matter with me? she thought angrily. *Just get away, go.*

But she paused and looked back at the camp. The Tiran, warm in their tents, snug on Bayern land, safe from attack all winter long. Her power, the augury, all useless if she did not act. *To come all this way and not burn.* The desire assaulted her, sharp as hatchet strikes, and she winced. Avoiding the thought seemed impossible. The longer she crouched there, hesitating, the more the pain built and boiled, filling her body.

“All right,” she whispered.

In that moment, she felt her insides bend as though leaning toward something, and her careful grip on the desire of the fire twisted like a snake in her fist.

Her eyes rested on a stack of barrels. She pulled in the heat, smooth and slick as butter, felt it change inside her, and sent it flying into her target. There was a satisfying explosion as the contents blew into the air.

A chill shook her as the heat left and shouts buffeted the night. She scrambled away, still keeping close to the ground. As soon as she dipped down over the first rise, she stood and ran. Immediately she heard bootfalls behind her and then a voice, clear and commanding.

“Stop or I will put this spear in you.”

Enna stopped, her skin wincing in anticipation of the spear. She had expelled all her waiting heat at those barrels. She held no weapon. He came closer.

“You will surrender yourself,” he said.

She was not quite numb yet, but she had no more gathered heat to attack. If only he were closer . . . *No, no,* she argued with herself, *I can’t set fire to a person.*

“I said, surrender,” he said.

But if I don’t, I die. In that moment the maddening need to survive filled her, and she recognized in that need the same feeling the heat created when it pushed against her to be made into fire. *Just do it. Just burn him.* There seemed no other option. If only she were not alone.

Closer. She could feel him now. With a gasp she tugged at his body heat, what rose from his skin and circled around his head. Suddenly she knew she could get more, if she wished. She kept pulling and felt as though she tugged on a rope and someone on the other end tugged back, but she pulled harder and felt it give, freeing heat that was not loose, but what lived in his skin and beneath it. She heard him wheeze. She drew it in and sent it back at him again in its new and perfect form.

He screamed. Smoke rushed into her throat. Coughing, Enna turned and fled.

She did not look back, afraid to see him, afraid that if she looked, the image would burn itself in her eyes and she might never forget. Instead, what she did not see stayed with her, the orange flames thick in his tunic, licking his face, rising into his eyes. She shook her head and tried to focus

on the moment—the darkness before her, the frozen grass crushed beneath her boot, the sensation that just behind her was something terrible and if she turned slightly, she would see.

At last she reached Merry and rode off to the northwest, holding close to the mare's warm neck. She was numb from the fire making and from crawling on the cold ground and from fear, and she wanted the very real heat she could feel when she pressed her fingers into the horse's fur.

As the mare galloped, Enna felt her insides rattle. She breathed in and out quickly, trying to clear her lungs, but the smell of smoke still clung like grease to her skin. She squinted into the cold wind and clutched the mare tighter. She had sworn never to set flame to a person, but she had failed. Her mind clung to Leifer and tried to avoid the pulsing thought of what she had just done. That sensation of something horrible just over her shoulder stayed with her on the long ride back.

She arrived in Ostekin well after dawn, dismounted west of the town, and walked the mare slowly to the stables.

"Come along, pudding," she said, stroking her mane. "Come along, honeysuckle."

The mare neighed sleepily, and Enna stopped to hold her neck and breathe into her mane. It felt so good to have a companion. And the horse was such a brave, patient creature to go out into the cold night world, risking the invisible drone of arrows and spears.

I'm brave, too, Enna thought gently, feeling like a little girl in need of comfort.

Enna waved off the stable-hand and took the mare in herself, taking off the saddle, hanging up the tack, brushing her down with great care. Work felt like the only comfort just then. Burning Eylbold perimeter tents was not chasing Tira off Bayern land, and she had broken a promise, had actually set fire to a person. Her mission was failing.

When she led the mare back to her stall, she found Razo curled up in the corner on a pile of clean straw.

"Razo." She rubbed her face in exhaustion.

He coughed in his sleep, then bolted upright and saw her. "Enna."

"Razo, this mare is falling asleep as I stand here. Can she have her stall back?"

Razo scuttled to his feet and out of the stall. His upright hair supported even taller bits of straw, and they wobbled dangerously when he moved.

“Enna, you’re not a scout.”

“No, not officially.” She put the mare in the stall and rubbed her down again, not matching Razo’s gaze.

“I know that. I mean, I thought you might be, but Talone made me a scout and I asked him and he said, no, of course not.”

“No, of course not, you Forest yokel. They’d never make a Forest woman a spy for all of Bayern.”

“He would’ve made Isi one. He asked her.”

“Well, yes, of course.” Enna would want Isi by her side. What a companionship they would make, wind and fire. But her connection to her best friend felt sliced, the weight of the augury unbending and, after last night, her mission brutal and pointless. She sat down heavily on the hay. “I’m not a very good friend, Razo.”

“Enna.” His voice, worried and hopeful, made her look up. “There’s a scouting report from Eylbold. I heard last night. One of the villagers told our man that there’re fires again. It’s given them all a real fright.”

“Has it now.”

Razo looked at her meaningfully. “Talone, he thinks it’s just rumor, or maybe coincidence. But if he knew it was someone under his command, the stone face might actually pop a vein. He’d get fired up about sabotage during peace agreement, you know he would. But I think someone from our camp is sneaking a mount and riding out to burn Tiran tents.”

More than tents. Enna’s stomach cramped as she thought of the sentry. “Yes, I know.” She pressed her lips together and weighed her two options: break a promise and tell Razo, or continue on her own and risk another encounter like the sentry last night. If Razo could help her avoid burning another person, would that be a promise worth breaking?

“You’re not really asking me, are you? You’ve already guessed.”

“No,” said Razo, feigning sincerity, “I’ve been waiting in every horse’s stall to ask them if they’ve been out burning Tiran camps.”

“Yes, yes, all right.” She gathered clean straw over her lap like a blanket and told him her story, of reading the vellum, of swearing never to burn, and then the augury.

“Do you remember those last moments of Finn’s fight?” she asked. “I do. I can still see that Tiran sword coming down toward Finn’s chest. I know the outcome of this war if I don’t play my part.”

Razo nodded. He had not spoken since she began, just listened and picked at a knot in the wood grain. Now, slowly, he said, "And you need my help."

"I need another pair of eyes," she said. "The fire, it's strong, and I think I can fight it, I think I'm doing better than Leifer, but last night I had to . . . I almost lost control, or maybe I did, and then there was someone chasing me . . ." She took a breath. "I want someone not just to watch out for enemies, but to watch me, pull me back if I go too far."

Razo frowned thoughtfully.

"I'm asking you because you're nosy enough to've figured it out on your own," said Enna, "and you've got good eyes, and being a scout, you might have a way to get us inside a taken town, where I can have a bigger effect."

She bit her lip and waited for his reaction. At last he looked at her.

"What?" said Razo. "What's that look you're giving me? You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"Razo, come on, I'm waiting for your answer."

"You are? Well, you know that I will. We have to, of course. I was just thinking of how to explain to Talone, but since you're so set on secrecy I guess I won't. Anyway, I'm sure he'd agree it's of more use than just scouting." He smiled and crossed his heart with his fist. "We'll do it, Enna. For the Forest. For Bayern! Though I should admit to you that my first thought was that if I became a hero, wouldn't Bettin be sorry then that she picked Offo?"

"Ha."

Razo's eyes brightened at some thought, and he smiled excitedly. "And won't we be proud when those white tents go fleeing back to Tira and all Bayern shouts our names and says, Hooray for the Forest dwellers! Hooray for Razo! And, uh, Enna, too!"

Enna shook her head. "And if they never chant our names?"

"No matter. We'll feel like we're living in a tale, like the ones Isi used to spin for us. It has to end well."

"Hmm," she said, "in my memory, not all her tales ended well."

"Ours will," he said confidently. "You'll see."

"In that case, Razo, if you become a hero, there'll be plenty of girls besides Bettin. If we succeed, I might even be willing to wink at you."

Razo made a gagging face, and Enna laughed and slugged him in the arm. A lightness in her chest felt like hope.

Chapter 10

Folcmar." Razo pointed on the map to a town southeast of Eylbold. "Talone gave me the assignment this morning. I'm to report back in two days. Thought this might be our opportunity."

Enna nodded. She had stayed in Ostekin for a week, waiting for Razo. She felt an itch on the inside of her skin. Heat accompanied her everywhere, like a gaggle of children promised a treat out of grandmother's pocket. At last she could work again.

Enna met him that afternoon a league east of Ostekin. He waved when he saw her, then quickly returned his hands to the reins and eyed his moving mount suspiciously. She laughed at both of them, a couple of Forest cubs riding horses like nobles, sneaking around on hush-hush missions.

"You look like a rooster up there with your wobbling cock's comb and arms flapping for balance."

Razo glowered. "You've had more practice than I have."

"I thought you'd love it. On a horse, you triple in height."

"Yes, yes, let's just go."

Enna followed him east and then southeast. The low sun cast their shadows forward so that Enna felt she was running after herself, always a stride behind. It was a relief when the sun set and she felt herself in that familiar place again, hidden inside the night. At such times, the world seemed sad and depleted of light and heat, and aching to be set on fire.

It was a long ride to Folcmar, so Razo stopped in a ravine formed by a chain of low hills. They slept in a small gray tent meant to fit one man. Enna did not dare build a campfire in case Tiran scouts were near. That night, when her numb feet woke her, she sleepily gathered Razo's lost heat, careful not to take any from his living body. She found she could pull little bits inside her, not to make fire, just to push them into her toes and fingers. They stung, then throbbed, then warmed so that she could sleep again. She closed her eyes, and swirling images of orange and red pulsed behind her lids.

In the morning, Razo showed Enna a Tiran blue coat and leather jerkin.

“I’ve got two complete outfits from the supply taken from captives. We’ll dance in there tomorrow and call the place home.”

“So easily?” asked Enna, remembering her failed entry into Eylbold and the sentry she burned.

“It’ll be a lot easier for us to get into their camp pretending to be Tiran than it would for a Tiran in Ostekin, or so Talone figures. Bayern hundred-bands all come from the same villages, so everyone knows everybody else. But the Tiran group their armies differently. A fellow from the north might share a tent with a fellow from the seacoast, so they could have a stranger at their fire and not think two things of it.”

They rode over the long, empty plains, then wove through woods until Enna could see the roofs of Folcmar beyond the clusters of white tents. If they were required to say more than a word or two, their Bayern accents—worse, their thick Forest accents—would break their disguise. And should anyone look at her too closely, even in leggings and leather helmet, Enna did not believe she would pass as a boy.

No one stopped them as they entered, their hands gripping the reins so hard that their fingers turned blue. Enna looked around the busy camp and caught sight of several captive town women. She noted that they all wore blue strips of cloth tied around their waists, tagged like cattle that belong to one herd.

Razo looked to be memorizing the layout of the camp and estimating the number of soldiers. His eyes darted frantically, his lips moved as though he counted under his breath. Enna swallowed against a shudder and felt her body tense, her blood run faster. She realized now that for days she had been holding off thoughts of fire, but now, so close to being able to burn, the heat whirled around her like pecking birds. Just looking for a target eased her discomfort and gave her a little thrill.

Up ahead, a wood rack supported dozens of spears. Beside it, stacks of leather armor. That was much better than a perimeter tent. Now she would start to make a difference.

They were getting quite close. Enna tried to figure how far she could send the fire-forging heat, how much heat would be lost over the distance, and if it would be enough to produce a fire big and hot enough to grab the leather, too. Just a little closer, she decided. She urged Merry faster. The mare seemed as anxious as she.

“Where are you going?” A fatherly looking soldier with a guard’s spear called to them. She and Razo exchanged looks, and Razo pointed up ahead.

The soldier squinted at them, and he frowned slightly. “What is your unit name?”

Caught, thought Enna. How to get out? She had only one weapon. She saw Razo open his mouth as if to speak, make up a name.

“Look,” Enna said hurriedly, pointing straight ahead.

The Tiran soldier turned to see. It was easy for her to collect the heat around her body and find more with so many bodies, the sun shining, the cookfires sizzling. The burn as the fire entered her chest almost felt good now, a necessary pain like pulling a sore tooth. The release was better. Before the soldier turned completely, before his eyes rested on the rack of spears, it was blazing. The fire seized and blistered the leather armor. Men ran for water. Serving women stopped and watched.

Enna and Razo had to move away slowly so as not to draw attention. Enna knew this. But setting those weapons on fire sparked her desire to do more, and she was not numb yet to the heat. Here she was surrounded by enemy tents and supplies. Here she could make a difference now, speed the war to an end. But she had promised caution, and not to burn big as Leifer had. She became aware of pain in her hands from squeezing the reins so tightly. It took all her focus to ignore the fire, keep her eyes on the back of Razo’s head, and let Merry walk to the edge of camp.

Once clear of the white tents, they trotted, and when their trembling muscles could not hold back anymore, they kicked their mounts into a run. Enna found her chest hiccuping oddly as they rode, and after a moment she realized she was sobbing. She breathed deeply and smeared the wet from her cheeks. She pounded a fist against her chest and rode on harder. The wind helped ease away clinging heat, and the exercise of the ride helped her forget the unused fire.

They camped that night in the same ravine. She expected Razo to be jubilant after their successful entry and escape, but he seemed more sober than usual as he prepared their meal and set up camp. After a meal around the fire, he finally spoke.

“You seemed pretty upset on the ride back.”

Enna shrugged. “It was a little worse than normal, but I did all right.”

“You told me you were worried about it,” said Razo. “But I was so busy counting stuff and trying not to look like a boy in a stolen helmet that I

didn't even notice you, not until later."

"It's all right, I kept it under control."

Razo nodded. "Still, I think we need someone to be a third. I'm not the best swordsman, and I can't be guarding if I need to be scouting, so I'll grab someone trustworthy next time we ride."

Enna nearly argued, but she did not want Razo to think she was ignoring caution, so she just shrugged. "But he'd better be trustworthy."

Enna kept herself busy for a week and two days. She washed clothes like a woman starved for work. When the washing water was too cold and nobody was near enough to hear the hiss, she set off a quiet bubble of submerged fire. It warmed her hands and gave her a little burst of pleasure. But both passed quickly. Compared to the danger and significance of their burning raids, everything else was mundane.

Sometimes to stretch her back she walked through camp, always hoping for sight of Razo, who might give her a nod, finally some indication that they could move forward.

"Patience," she told herself, scratching her arms and refusing to acknowledge the pressing heat. But she could not ignore the knowledge of the Tiran camped just to the south. The awareness of their presence was constant now and felt like a splinter stinging her back, just out of reach.

She scanned one of the Forest band camps for Razo, then turned quickly, bumping into the chest of a soldier.

"Where'd you come from?" she said, then, "Oh," when she saw it was Finn. She had never realized before that he was so tall, and his chest felt as solid as a Forest pine.

He took a step back, pushing his dark hair off his brow. "Sorry. My fault. I was too close. I like your . . . your apron. The yellow is nice."

Enna ran a hand over her damp, stained apron and laughed a little. "Thanks, Finn. I dyed it myself."

"Mmm." He looked down. "I help my ma dye, in the summers."

"Yes, I know. I stayed with you once and helped out, about a year ago, right?"

"Yes, you did." He flashed a pleased smile, then looked back at his boots. He seemed to have nothing more to say.

"Well, I should get back to the house."

"I'll walk you back," he said.

“Don’t bother, Finn,” said Enna, “Hesel isn’t there now.”

Enna gave him a smug grin as she walked away, but Finn did not laugh. She kept walking and thought that Finn needed some backbone if he could not even be teased about his little love affair.

At last Razo came with the word: Adelmund the day after next. It would be a three-day trip. She filled the Tiran-style, long-necked water skins, packed her bedroll, stashed dried venison, hard bread, some oats in case there was little for the mare to forage, and an oiled skin. Razo would have the tent and Tiran uniforms.

When she neared the spot where they had agreed to meet, about a league west of Ostekin, she saw two riders instead of one.

“It’s all right,” said Razo, “it’s just Finn.”

“Finn?” Enna strained to see the figure in the distance. A boy sat patiently on horseback, his spine straight, looking away as though he wished to give them privacy.

“You must’ve known I’d ask Finn,” Razo said with an acutely innocent expression. “You have to admit he’s the most trustworthy person we know, besides being a good soldier and good company. Why do you look all surprised?”

Enna shrugged. “I just didn’t expect him.”

“I didn’t tell him about you, if that’s what you’re worried about. So you can still send him home, if you like. But I think we need him, and I’ll be honest”—he leaned across his horse as though he were telling a secret —“now that he knows we go on scouts together, I don’t think he’ll leave easily. He about spitted me when he found out we’d been sharing a tent. Called me some name I didn’t know. He thought he had to defend your honor.” Razo looked dead serious, then laughed as though it were a great joke.

Enna glared at him, and Razo rolled his eyes.

“Oh, just talk to him so we can get moving.” Razo trotted his horse past Finn and made southwest as though intending to go whether or not she followed.

“Hello, Finn,” said Enna, and pulled up beside him. They began to walk their mounts toward Razo. “How’d you manage to get away from your commander? You’re not assigned scout duty.”

“They call me the champion,” he said. “It’s because of the augury match. No one seems to mind much where I go.” He turned in his saddle to better see her face. “Were you there?”

“Yes, I was.”

He inspected his reins. “I didn’t know if you’d seen it. I was thinking about you.”

“I was thinking about you, too. We all were,” she added quickly. “So, what did Razo say to convince you to come?”

Finn swallowed. “He said—you might need some protection.”

“Maybe I can defend myself.” She reached down and loosed a piece of straw from her bootstraps. “I’m going to show you something, but you can’t tell a soul, all right?” When he nodded, Enna sent heat at the tip of the straw. It blazed briefly, then smoked and glowed, before she dropped it.

“Just like Leifer.” Finn was clutching the hilt of his sword, but he slowly let it go. His brow creased, and he looked at her shrewdly. “Are you being careful, Enna?”

“Yes,” she said.

Finn tilted his head with an expression that was almost accusatory.

“I *am*,” said Enna. “You don’t need to be so snappish about it.”

“I saw him, you know, do that to you.” He glanced down at her ankles, and from the look in his eyes Enna thought he was seeing her on fire again. “It didn’t seem like Leifer to do that. I’ve wondered if it was him what did it, or if he couldn’t control the fire, or . . . ” He shrugged.

Enna looked at him straight on. “I can control it, Finn. And that’s why Razo’s here, and you, to help me make sure.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ll have a sword watching your back.”

“Come on, you two,” said Razo, slowing down to their pace. “If we want to reach a campsite before middle night, we need to give these animals some exercise.”

They found the spot long after dark. It was protected from a south view by a swell in the land and a line of river trees. The river still ran, and they watered their horses. The day had warmed the land, and the wild grasses did not break under their feet. Because of Finn, Razo had managed to come by a larger tent, but when he and Enna pulled their bedrolls inside, Finn remained outside.

“Come on, Finn,” said Razo, “it’s warmer with people around you.”

Finn refused, not meeting their looks. “It’s warm enough out here.”

During the night, whenever Razo's snarled breathing or her frozen feet woke her, Enna fed heat back into the fire. She watched its initial blaze light up Finn's curled-up body.

In the morning, they donned their stolen uniforms. Finn insisted that he and Razo hold up the oiled skin and allow Enna to undress behind. The ride from their camp to Adelmund took them half the day. They rode right through the outer circles of the camp into the town and down the main road. Enna noticed Tiran citizens who were not soldiers—women with pale, cropped hair who did not wear the blue sash of Bayern prisoners, Tiran men in working clothes, Tiran men in robes of leadership. *They're planning to stay*, thought Enna. Their heat wrapped around her and scratched against her skin. *Burn, burn, burn.* Everything looked flammable.

"Razo," Enna said softly. She gripped her saddle and felt her chin start to quiver.

"Just a minute," said Razo, distracted by his counting.

Enna looked back at Finn. He was scanning the surroundings, but when he saw her, he nodded that all was well. They did not notice her agitation, and that encouraged her. Perhaps it was not as bad as she thought. She scratched her arms and watched the road before her tilt and twist. *Ignore it*. *It's just the heat*, she told herself. The buildings around her seemed to crackle in anticipation. A breeze whipped up the tent flaps like the dancing flames of a white fire. Smoky plumes of steam poured upward from a cook pot. All the world wanted to burn.

She felt the need twisting and writhing under her control. If she was not careful . . . but was that not why she was here? To burn? Perhaps the desire was powerful right now simply because it was time to burn. But she had promised Razo to wait for his cue.

"Razo, say it's all right," she said.

Razo looked at her, bewildered. "What's all right?"

"Just tell me I can. Now."

Razo blinked a few times, then seemed to understand. "Go ahead, I guess."

Before he finished speaking, fire ruptured the roof of a large storage tent and licked the air as though grasping for more. The relief of letting go was so fierce, she wanted to either sob or laugh out loud. The tightness in her chest loosened, her hands stopped shaking, and she took a deep breath and felt cleaner.

“Over there,” said Finn, pointing away from the three. He had practiced those two words for hours on the ride to their campsite, trying to imitate as best as they could guess how one from Tira might sound. It seemed to work. A general rush of soldiers ran toward the fire and the direction he pointed.

Enna found she could still burn. No one seemed to suspect them, and burning more than once made sense, so she gave herself permission. The freedom was exhilarating. She found another target farther from the road so it would appear that the fire-witch was running away. A pile of hay under an oiled cloth began to snap and smoke.

“Over there,” said Finn, pointing to the right of the hay.

More rushing, more shouting. Razo fought a smile.

Farther ahead, Enna spotted stacked barrels of wine and felt giddy to discover that place in her chest expanded to receive yet more heat.

“Ov—” Finn started, then stopped. In the excitement, he was getting ahead of himself as Enna had not yet set the fire. She glanced back at him with a laughing smirk and then sent heat hurtling into barrels of wine. The explosion splattered the surrounding white tents with purple like the blood of a huge beast. At last the fire in her was sated, and the heat near her skin drifted away.

“Over there,” said Finn, confidently this time.

“Where?” A frantic soldier came up to Finn and grabbed his ankle. “What do you see?”

“Over there,” said Enna, pointing beyond the barrels. The soldier ran off with his sword drawn. Razo bit his lip.

The three rode around the camp as though aiming to head off any escaping criminals, then veered off to the north and galloped away. After a league or so, they slowed their horses and began to chuckle.

“Over there,” said Razo in an extreme Tiran accent, pointing ahead.

Finn looked left, right, left, with the quick movements of a bird.

“Where?” Enna asked with mock panic. “Do you see something?”

“Over there,” said Finn, relishing every syllable and pointing up in the air with a look of complete bewilderment.

They laughed, clutching their saddles to stay upright.

“I’ve missed you, Finn,” Enna said unexpectedly.

“Yes, me too.” Finn smiled one of his large, gracious smiles.

There was still some light when they returned to the campsite. In celebration, Enna tried to roast a squirrel out of a tree, but the meat tasted as

it smelled—like singed fur.

"Well, that's enough of that," said Enna, dumping the uneaten meat into the fire. The flames snapped into it gleefully.

They feasted instead on the two squirrels Razo had downed with his sling. The taste of roasted meat, the success of the day, and the sound of Finn and Razo laughing felt like a bubble of contentment expanding in her chest. She thought, *Fire does good things*, and wondered why she had never thought of it before.

After eating, they stared at the fire, always a startling sight when the rest of the world was dark, and retold stories they had learned from Isi back in the animal worker days. Each told their favorite—Razo about the warrior whose mother bathed him in her own blood to make him invincible; Enna about the girl who could weave living animals on her loom that carried her to the land where music was first forged; Finn about the man who so loved an imprisoned woman that his heart broke and flew out of his chest and sang to her each day through her barred window.

Enna watched the fire as he spoke and imagined what he saw, the face of the woman as she listened to the song, gaining the courage to escape her prison, learning that the bird's wings sprouted from the two halves of the man's broken heart. And then the woman followed the bird back to its master to find him dead, so she bade the heart rejoin with the man and swore to love him as he loved her. Enna glanced up then. The ending she knew was not so tidy, but Finn seemed to relish his improved version.

With night fell a fresh winter cold. Light, airy flakes of snow like gray ashes fell on the fire and made sweet, soft hisses. Razo stood and stretched.

"Come on in the tent tonight, Finn," he said. "It's cramped but cozy, and I don't want to have to dig you out in the morning."

"You'd better," said Enna. "I shouldn't have to be the only one suffering through Razo's snoring. He sounds like an entire pen of angry piglets."

Razo shoved her shoulder and crawled into the tent. Finn hesitated, glanced at Enna, and nodded.

Late in the night, Enna woke. She was lying on her side facing Finn, though she could barely make him out in the blackness. She felt his breath touch her forehead in soft, rhythmic sighs. What woke her was his hand on her hair. He pulled back, and her head felt lighter for losing his touch. She had never imagined this before, what it might be like to lie beside him, to feel so warm and safe and content. Her heart hit against her ribs, and she

tried to peer through the darkness and see if he was awake and, if so, how he looked at her.

Suddenly she realized she was holding her breath and quickly released it, long and slow, moaning slightly so that he might think she was still asleep.

In a hush-soft voice, Finn said, “All I’ve ever wanted was to be near you.” Then he rolled onto his back and sighed into sleep.

Enna held very still. Her muscles tightened from her brow to her feet, afraid he would touch her, afraid he would not. The sound of her heart would not leave her ears. She gasped in pain and realized she had pulled heat inside her and held it. Frantically her mind sought a place to expel it. She found the dying warmth of their fire pit and she sent the heat through the break in the tent flap. In the brief burst of light, she saw Finn. One hand curled under his chin. His eyes were closed, his lashes touched the tops of his cheeks. He smiled slightly.

With nothing to feed on but ash, the fire quickly died. The darkness was more absolute for the sudden lack of light, and Enna could not see even the outline of his body.

“You’re awake?” she whispered. No response.

She turned on her back, stared at the patterns that moved in the darkness, and wondered why she suddenly felt as vulnerable as a hare in a meadow, a trout in clear water. She put a hand over her smile to prevent a laugh. In the morning she woke that way, her fingers resting on her mouth as though holding back words so secret and insistent, they might slip out while she slept.

Chapter 11

The next day, Enna noticed for the first time that Finn's brown eyes had specks of yellow around the edges. It gave the effect of deepness, and she found herself looking at him more than before. His hands were a man's hands, callused and strong. His face had lost its boyish roundness some time ago, and since the war began, his timid grins were rare gifts. He was pleasant to look at.

The first time she found herself alone with him after Adelmund, they were walking back from the stables. In the distance, they both spotted Hesel hanging laundry. Finn said, "Razo told me what he said about Hesel. And me. I just want you to know it's not true."

"Oh," she said, wanting to ask him why it mattered, to talk at last about what that might mean to her. But they passed near a cookfire, and the heat stretched out toward her, and the hollowness in her chest pulsed eagerly. Her throat itched, her stomach hurt, and she forgot what she was going to say. She thought she must be coming down with a cold.

Scout reports came from Eylbold, where Enna had first set her fires, that the Tiran were building a gallows. Speculation was rampant in Ostekin. Were they planning to execute Bayern townsfolk? Captured soldiers? Or something even worse? The talk bothered her, like being pinched over and over again in the same place. When she faced southwest and thought of the Tiran encampment, the gallows were on her mind.

"We should go to Eylbold," she said to Razo. "We should burn the gallows."

Razo shook his head. "Talone gave me the next assignment—Adelmund."

But the mission went badly. This time they were quizzed at the perimeter, and when Razo did not dare to answer for his accent and Finn said, "Over there," and no one looked, they fled. Enna set a couple of tents on fire as they left. She hoped it might serve as a distraction, turn a few eyes from them to the fires. They escaped all right after Finn fought off two soldiers, but still she ached for something else. She was irritated and anxious, and as

she rode everything seemed slightly off angle, as though the earth were tipping slowly to one side.

They rode east all night, thinking to confuse any followers. After two hours or more, they saw a lone rider ahead, flying east as well. The three exchanged looks and understood—this was someone from Adelmund, most likely riding with word of Bayern dressed as Tiran entering towns to light fires. They spurred their mounts in a chase. As they neared, Razo loaded his sling with a stone and at full gallop shot it at the rider's back. He slumped forward and his mount slowed for a moment, long enough for Enna to get close.

She had not decided yet what to do with the fire when she brought the heat inside her. As soon as it spun in her chest, it began to pull out, seeking the closest target—the Tiran's body. Enna cried out, struggling briefly with the nascent fire. *Into him*, it prompted. *Send the fire inside.* She grappled, the heat searing her chest, and finally released the fire against the ground at the horse's feet. The animal spooked, rearing back from the flames, and sent the rider to the ground.

Razo helped Finn tie the spy's ankles and wrists and sling him over Finn's pommel.

"Well, that was good luck," said Razo. "He was on his way to Eylbold, no doubt, ready to go screaming about the fire-witch. Well done, Champion Finn, and that wasn't bad slinging on my part, if I can say so."

"You just did," said Finn. He smiled at Enna, but his smile quickly faded. "Are you all right?"

"Mm? Oh, yes, fine. Well done." She did not feel much up to talking.

It was a long ride back to Ostekin for Enna. She tried to flinch away from the memory of where she had almost sent the fire, but the long, chilled hours on Merry's back gave no escape. She shivered, wanting to rid herself of that feeling the way a horse shakes off flies.

She had wanted to set a person on fire.

But I didn't, she comforted herself. *I resisted. That's all that matters.* By the time they arrived back in Ostekin, she was nearly recovered. The numbness in her chest had eased, and she felt warm and comfortable.

After Razo and Finn delivered the scout to the prison guards, the three sat around a Forest band campfire. Razo's eyes were so tired, they looked bruised purple. Finn pushed his sword tip into the ground and rested his forehead on the hilt.

“What a night,” said Razo. “I thought it’d never end. I thought we’d end up filleted and battered and buttered on bread.”

“Good that we stopped that spy,” said Finn.

“Suppose.” Razo glanced at Enna to gauge her reaction. “Still, I don’t think we should raid again for some time, maybe weeks.”

“Ha,” Enna said playfully. She hoped he was kidding. The thought of not burning for weeks gave her a sick, panicky feeling in her gut. “You’ve heard the rumors. We have to go to Eylbold.”

Razo twisted small holes in the ground with a stick. He looked close to nodding off. “I think you burned there too many times in the beginning.”

Enna handed Finn her empty cup, and he stood to fetch another round of heated milk and honey from the Forest band cookfire.

“They might not know to look for us,” she said, “Bayern dressed as Tiran, since we stopped the scout. Not if we go soon. Tomorrow.”

Razo tossed his stick into the fire. “Scouting reports also say that’s their center now. It’s dangerous. We might have a better chance if you hadn’t set those tents aflame in Adelmund after they already suspected us.”

“Someone should go,” said Enna.

“Talone’ll probably send someone. . . . ”

“But he doesn’t know about me, and I’m the best choice. Finn?”

Finn stood by, her mug warming his hands. He met Razo’s eyes and looked down.

“Enna,” he said gently.

Enna stood up, looking back and forth between the two. “What is it? What’s going on? You two have something you want to tell me?”

Razo glanced at Finn again and sighed. “You’re not going to say a word, are you, Finn? Well, I’m not afraid.” He met Enna’s eyes defiantly, then blinked and looked away. “You’re spooking us, Enna-girl. You’re, you’re not right.”

Enna felt her jaw tighten. “What do you mean I’m not right?”

“I’ll tell you straight,” said Razo. “Sometimes when we’re out there, the expression on your face gives me skin prickles to my scalp.”

“I’ve been doing fine,” she said. “Am I a charred corpse lying in Adelmund? Have I set the town on fire and every Tiran in sight? I’m doing well. I made promises and I’m keeping them. I mean, I let you two in on the secret about the fire, but I had to, and I promised I wouldn’t burn people

and I haven't, except that once, but it was a mistake and I haven't done it again. You don't know how hard it is sometimes, but I still hold back."

"But it's hard," said Finn. "I've been worried, Enna. If it's hard for you, then maybe, for a little bit, you could take a break."

"No, I can't take a break." *The augury*, she thought, but she did not want to tell Finn what she had done during his combat. "I don't need it. I'm fine."

"You looked funny after we caught that spy," said Razo. "I don't know what to say. It'd be a shame to stop. I mean, we've been doing so well, but you . . . " His voice got quiet as he stared at the fire. "You've changed. You've got that wild look in you, like Leifer had before the end. I think you're one loop short of a knot, Enna. A little tug, and you're undone."

Enna snorted a laugh. "I'm telling you I'm fine. I would know if I was close to losing control, and I'm not. Finn, don't you trust me?"

Finn paused. "Not just now," he said sadly.

They all went silent then. Enna turned her back to stare at the fire and dry the shock from her face. Panting flames the color of scarecrow straw twisted and writhed out of blackened wood. Someone laid a hand on her shoulder, probably Finn, but she ignored him. She played at sending bits of heat into its orange core, the fire splashing in brief higher bursts, like tossing stones in a pond. The exercise made her twitch.

When she looked up again, the flames still burned in memory in her eyes. It was a few moments before her sight adjusted again to the night and she saw that Razo and Finn were gone.

A cough shook her chest, and she coughed harder, trying to dislodge something caught in her throat. Nothing budged, so she tried to ignore the sensation. She sat down, closed her eyes, and through her eyelids saw the campfire tensing and turning. She imagined she was watching her own insides. Her heart was stoked coals, pulsing heat. Making ash. She felt like the loneliest person in the world.

Eylbold. The gallows. She would have to go alone. The thought of the mission made her sad. She hugged her knees against her chest. It was true that at moments her grip on the fire felt like trying to squeeze soap underwater, but she knew she had to fight through it anyway, and she knew she would win. The augury had spoken. There had to be a way to make an impact without breaking her promise not to burn people and not to burn big, as Leifer had done.

This gallows felt like the first good target, and she would hit it hard. She promised the desire inside her that she would see the gallows burn. She had to or all was lost. Beyond reason or thought, that certainty held her, soothed her, allowed her to breathe out and wait. At that decision, the heat loosened around her, and she cooled and calmed and felt secure again that though the fate of the war tugged at her like a rope around her neck, she would succeed.

She waited until full night. Her sense of the Tiran sitting in Eylbold just a few hours' ride to the south was so powerful now that it made her dizzy, like being shut indoors with a strong smell. She did not see Razo or Finn on her way to the stables. Everything she needed was in Merry's saddlebag—water, food, a bundle of Tiran clothing. She led the mare to the edge of town, keeping her head down, not wanting to see the boys. She was afraid, and hopeless, and determined. A cool thought slid through her and gave her goose bumps—she could just not go. She could forget the gallows and Eylbold and the augury. She recoiled from the thought as she might from proffered poison. *I have to*, she reminded herself. *For Bayern. For everyone.*

Enna passed the east gate and heard a familiar voice call her name. She turned and felt relief briefly lighten her shoulders.

"Isi," she said, "you're back."

They stood just outside the town. The fires of Ostekin camp were behind Isi, but Enna did not need more light to know the long pale hair hanging loose, tall stature, and slight frame. Isi was dressed in her travel clothes, wide riding skirts, thick tunic, and cloak, all dyed dull colors. The Bayern liked things bright and colorful, but wartime seemed to stultify everything.

Isi's tone was frank. "Enna, the wind thinks you're on fire. You smell like smoke."

"I'm not. I'm just . . . Isi, so much has happened. If I could explain it all, you'd understand. I've been afraid to tell you. But really, I'm all right, and I'm doing good . . . good things."

Isi looked down. "Geric received reports of burning. We returned today and heard details from Talone. He doesn't suspect you, of course. He thinks you're my friend and would never sneak around like that. But there's a Tiran scout in the cells whom Razo and Finn captured, and he's babbling about how a fire-witch stopped him. Geric thinks he's just paranoid, but I, I think it was you."

Enna felt her breath get short. “I have to go, Isi.”

“I can’t let you, Enna.”

Enna clenched her fists. Heat swirled around her like chaotic dancers, bumping into her, grazing against her skin. She felt herself sway. “Leifer tried to tell me what it was like, but I didn’t understand then, and you don’t now.”

“Let me try,” said Isi. “You read Leifer’s vellum, and you meant well. You want to help Bayern with the fire. But things in you have begun to change. All this time in the city I’ve been thinking on this and reading what I could. The wind’s changed me, so it makes sense that fire could change Leifer and you. Nothing it touches can remain unscathed.”

Enna shook her head. “It’s not an evil thing, Isi. I’m not. Please don’t hate me. You don’t believe in the augury, so you can’t see what I’m seeing. Finn would’ve died, Isi. He was fighting for all Bayern, and he would’ve died. I’m so afraid.” She felt her chin start to tremble, and she wanted to rush forward and cry on Isi’s neck. “Please don’t make it harder. I know what I have to do, but I’m so scared, and I just need to keep moving, keep going until it’s done. If I stop to think, I might get too scared, and I can’t stop now.”

Isi took a step closer. “Enna, are you sure you have to? Really sure? Because you seem seized by all this. It’s not your fault. It’s just that the fire is bigger than any one person.”

Enna felt her legs tremble. *Not bigger than me.*

“Fire must burn.” Isi spoke more frantically, as though chasing down each thought before speaking. “That’s its only need. It doesn’t have a human mind. But I wonder, when it got inside of you, or Leifer, its need must be overpowering you, and the desire you feel to burn might just be your own human mind making up human reasons to see it through. Like Leifer, at first seeing Bayern as an enemy and then switching his need for an enemy to Tira. And now it’s using you.”

Chills shook Enna. She started to think about what Isi said, but it was getting hard to see. A yellow haze was thickening before her, and she rubbed her eyes and tried to breathe. *The gallows*, was her only clear thought. *The mission, the gallows. I promised to stop the war.*

Enna started to turn.

“Wait, Enna, don’t. Just be still a moment and think.”

“I can’t,” said Enna, pleading. The heat was pressing itself against her face, into her mouth when she spoke, into her eyes so they stung. “Please, just let me go. If you knew . . . if you could feel . . . you’d let me go, Isi.”

Isi advanced. Her expression was grim and serious. “This isn’t you, Enna. I will stop you if I can.” She took Enna’s wrist.

“No!” said Enna, tearing away. She could not bear it another moment. The heat was pressing, pressing; the enemy sat unchallenged, Finn would be dead, and so would all of Bayern. And Isi was in the way. Enna pulled all that built-up heat inside her, gasping at the burning pain. Isi was in the way. She had to get away. Now. The heat was blazing in her chest. She thrust it out.

The heat poured toward Isi, toward all that lovely, combustible cloth, that long, dead hair yearning to live again in heat and fire. But in that moment before the heat grabbed Isi and blazed into life, the wind came. Enna felt it swoop between them, a flash flood of cold. Enna struggled for breath and found none. The shooting heat was blown away, dissipating into the night before it could become fire. All gone. The air continued to roll over and around Enna, loosening any heat still clinging to her. She gasped and found air at last, her lungs aching with each breath. The wind left her cold, and she felt like a corpse standing.

She looked up. Isi was holding a hand over her mouth.

“Isi,” Enna whispered. “I didn’t, I . . . ”

Enna felt as though all her words and feeling had been blown away with the fire. Isi, her best friend, she had sent the heat, she had tried to set her aflame. The whole world seemed to tilt crazily, and she just wanted to rush forward and fall at her feet and swear it was a mistake. Then the heat began to return to her, and she shuddered at its touch. The heat from Isi’s body. The heat from her mare. And with it the persistent reminder of the gallows, begging to be burned. Her head throbbed with her pulse, and it seemed to say, *Burn, burn, burn.*

Isi dropped the hand from her mouth. Enna opened her mouth to speak but found no words. She turned around to look southeast. Eylbold. She could hear Isi start to run toward town.

“Help!” Isi shouted. “Guards, come quick!”

Enna clambered into the saddle and rode away.

The cold rush of night wind pushed against Enna’s face, and she winced under its incessant swipe. She could not forget the exquisite release when

she had sent fire at her friend. How easy it was. Enna did not believe she could ever live to forget that feeling, could ever look at Isi again without remembering what she had tried to do. And now, Bayern guards might be riding at her heels, and ahead the invaders waited. All the world was wrong, and the only way she could see to make it right was by burning.

The wind current loosened her headscarf and whipped away the heat. She felt naked and raw. But even the wind and cold could not reach that bit of deep heat inside that was always ready, always waiting to burn again. Her body trembled in the saddle. She fought to hold on.

At last she knew Leifer's mind that night in the Forest. At last she could see herself from his eyes, looking at his sister as an obstacle to what everything inside him insisted he must do. He had been unable to resist the heat, unbelieving that it was that simple to set someone you love on fire. Unbelievably simple. There seemed no way to ever return, to ever be just Enna again. Razo and Finn had looked at her as at a stranger, and Isi . . . No, nothing could be the same. Why had the augury not even hinted that to fulfill her mission, she would have to give up everything?

Leifer's fate seemed unavoidable to her now. She had broken two of her rules. She had told Razo and Finn of the fire, and she had burned the living, setting fire to that Tiran soldier and trying to burn Isi. So far, she had honored the third rule by keeping her fires small, but perhaps only because she did not know how to burn big.

She pulled the mare short near the woods outside Eylbold and dismounted. The woods seemed unfriendly to her—the living trees unburnable and selfish with their slow heat locked inside bark, closed and dark, relishing the sunless hours. She wrapped her arms around the mare's neck and tried to soak in her warmth. Gently. Without drawing it. Just feeling it. The mare held still and received the affection. She felt an impulse to do something recklessly noble.

"I won't let you get hurt," she said, removed Merry's bridle, stuffed it in the emptied saddlebag, and slapped the mare's rump. It felt like a good, clean sacrifice to let the horse go, make sure the mare was out of danger and not think about herself. She slapped Merry again, and the mare hesitated, then began a halting trot north. Enna watched her horse go and felt small and alone. She would have to walk back to Ostekin, or perhaps to the Forest, when this was done. But she could not think clearly just then, and she turned her back to the north to face Eylbold.

Enna tied her blue headscarf around her waist. It was nearly the color of the sashes she had seen the taken Bayern women wear in the Tiran camps, and she thought it would serve. She clutched an armload of Tiran clothing as though it were laundry and set off toward town. Her hair brushed the tops of her shoulders as she walked and kept the cold off her neck, though the top of her head felt too exposed. She thought of pulling heat in to warm herself and resisted.

She slipped between two tents and was in the camp. The paths were deserted, only an occasional sentry at his post. The sentries ignored her, a Bayern girl wearing the blue sash of a taken woman, carrying a bundle of Tiran laundry. She drew on their escaping heat and carried it around her. Her muscles had stopped shaking, and the calm of her resolve felt heavier than wearing wet clothes, heavier than mud. She imagined Leifer had felt this way burning the battlefield. Perhaps he knew that he must be near the end, but conviction of his purpose propelled him on.

Enna made her way to the center of the town. There, indeed, stood a gallows. In the moonlight the pale wood looked blue, as though it were underwater. From its massive lintel swung three bodies, their necks roped. No, as she got closer she could see they were not bodies, but scarecrows. One wore a Bayern skirt and tunic, long, blackened straws for hair, and a clumsy crown. Isi. Enna realized that Isi had worn a Forest head wrap at the initial battle and the war councils, and the Tiran likely did not know that she was a foreigner with yellow hair. The other two wore Bayern uniforms. One was crowned—Geric. The other had strips of orange cloth hanging from his mouth. A breeze stirred the cloth, and Enna understood. Fire. The third was the fire-witch.

She could feel the camp's heat—sleeping bodies of men, sleeping horses, sleeping prisoners. She did not need to call to it. Heat seemed to know her now, and it wrapped around her, ready for use. In a bound, the heat pulled inside her, formed into flame, and tore out again. The scarecrows popped and fried.

"Ah," she sighed aloud. The burden was gone, and she felt joy.

She gathered more heat and sent it again. The lintel blazed. She repeated it again and again, gulping bits of heat, sending the fire in rapid succession like an archer going through a quiver of arrows. Soon the entire structure was a brilliant bonfire. Under the flames, the wood cracked and moaned

and coughed. The scarecrows fell from their blackened ropes and sizzled on the ground. The place felt radiant with life.

She tried to pull in heat one more time, one more blow, but choked on the effort. She could feel the scorching fire in front of her, but the pocket in her chest was cold and tight. The attempt made her gag and shiver, and she took two steps back.

She was conscious of herself standing alone in that square, dark, quiet, cold, and started to back away from the fire into the shadow of a tent. No one appeared. Surely others saw the fire, and those near would even smell and feel it. But there was no one. Silence.

Then, across the square, someone stepped forward into the light of the blaze. Sileph, the captain from the war council who had spoken to her. He was staring right at her.

"What?" she said with a breath, dropping her bundle of clothes and stumbling backward. Inside her burned-out, cold chest she could feel the prickling of fear.

On either side of the square, two archers arranged themselves, their bows cocked, one eye closed, arrows aiming at her heart. She fumbled to muster heat and send it flying quicker than their arrows. Then a new source of heat emerged right behind her. She tugged at it and gasped. It was a person. She started to turn when pain struck the back of her head, and then blackness.

Part Three



Prisoner

Chapter 12

Enna began to ache. She did not know where it came from. Everywhere. The entire world was ache and thirst and darkness. She heard herself moan. It scraped against her throat, a grounding sensation that roused her. Her eyelids felt sticky and hard, as though glued down with pine sap.

There was the sound of someone approaching, and then a cup was held to her lips. She gulped down the water and had time to notice that it had a sour, dry taste like green cherries before she again succumbed to the dreams.

And more dreams. Villages burned as she walked through them. Cornstalks sprouted ears of fire, and the fields caught it and burned green. A flock of white geese flew out of the ashes toward a silver sky. Their hard wings beat against the sky and it broke like a mirror, raining glass shards onto Enna's head. She ducked, then woke groggily. Someone nearby shoved a cup against her mouth. She pinched her lips together and tried to push it away, but her hands would not move. Water dripped down her chin. The cup withdrew.

"Who?" she said, trying to look around. It was either very dark or she still could not force open her lids. Hands held her face and pinched her nose. She struggled, then gasped, and the sour water poured down her throat.

She slept fitfully, and even inside the dreams she could feel herself shaking. Sometime later, she felt a blanket wrapped over her body. The warmth was so welcome that she struggled to say, "Thank you," but only managed a groan. Her tongue felt bigger than her mouth. She thought if she could just clear her head, she could will her tongue to shrink.

A hand stroked her cheek. Or was she already inside another dream?

When she began to discern the waking world again, she was force-fed another cup of water. The flavor was lighter than the others, and she slowly, painfully, awoke. At once she noticed a terrible pain in her stomach. As she focused on it, the pain shrank to a tight, sore realization of hunger. How long had she been dreaming?

She stilled her mind and tried to reason out where she was. She was lying on her side. Beneath her was rough cloth over cold ground. It must still be winter. No wind or sun—she was in some kind of enclosure. She could barely move with her ankles bound and her hands tied behind her back. She tried to move her head and winced. The gallows, the square, the person who came up from behind. So, she had been hit on the head. She gagged and tasted again the unripe-fruit tang of the unnatural water. First hit and then drugged.

Something else was very wrong. With a start she realized what it was—she could not feel heat. It was as though she had set the world on fire and there was nothing left living. Or just, she realized with alarm, that the drugs brought an artificial numbness. A world without heat felt cruel and empty, and she found she wanted to weep as though someone had died. Carefully she probed about her, trying to sense any traces of heat. Through the ground, around her body, farther away. Something was there. She felt it faintly, and her abused and woozy body assured her she could not drag any of the heat into her.

Her powerlessness angered her, and she focused all her strength on opening her eyes. She saw white. She was inside a tent. Daylight seeped through the cloth walls. A gray wool blanket was tucked around her body. She blinked, worked those tiny muscles, and tried to send her gaze farther than a few feet.

A person. A face. The lines became sharper. Sileph sat on the ground and watched her calmly. She was not surprised.

“Hello,” she said with a dry croak.

He nodded. “Do you see me, then? The watcher is watched at last.” He lifted a gourd cup from a pail. “Would you like some water?”

“I don’t want to sleep.” Her voice sounded as though it came from far away.

“This is just water. See?” He drank fully from the cup and wiped his chin. When she did not protest again, Sileph dipped the gourd and brought it to her side. He placed a hand under her neck and helped raise her to drink. She gulped the cold water and felt her body take it like parched earth takes in rain.

He lowered her head to the ground and left the tent. Her eyes open now and her consciousness sullenly returning, Enna felt every strand of her body throb and complain. She tried to heave herself onto her back, but the effort

sent ribbons of pain into her bound wrists and ankles, and her head spun. She lay still and concentrated on the crossing threads of the ground cloth before her, wishing the dizziness to abate. A tear spilled from the corner of her eye and wobbled on the surface of the oiled cloth.

She heard someone enter and looked up. Sileph held a wooden bowl and spoon.

"There is food," he said. "Will you eat?"

"Untie me."

He frowned, as though the suggestion wounded him. "I think I will assist you first. You can stretch after."

She realized then that even if she had free hands, she probably could not hold a spoon. She could not even hold herself up. Perhaps he had thought of that and wanted her to keep some dignity. She felt very little dignity just then with her face pressed to the ground. She was certain she had soiled herself while in the drugged sleep.

"Let me see," said Sileph, looking around. There was no hard wall to prop Enna up against. He sat on the ground beside her and pulled her upright, leaning her back against his chest. She had to rest her head on his neck to keep it upright.

"Now, my lady, if you do not mind, I will bring the food to your lips. I assure you there is nothing in here but barley, potatoes, venison, water, and salt. I brought it from my own fire. All right?"

She nodded, ashamed that she would have eaten the stew no matter what was in it. Just to smell food was agonizing. Her stomach twisted smaller, and she was afraid it would growl embarrassingly. Why should she be embarrassed? she suddenly wondered. She was a captive warrior, ruthlessly tied and drugged. But Sileph's manners made her feel in his debt. Her head buzzed and her stomach snapped. She would try to think on this later.

Sileph lifted a steaming spoonful, blew on it, and held it to her lips. She nearly swallowed the spoon with the stew.

"It has been some time since you ate. I should think you would want to take it slowly."

In truth, Enna wanted the entire bowl upended in her mouth. But as she swallowed the third spoonful, her stomach lurched. She bolted forward, constricting her throat, shaking with little convulsions. He pulled her back against him and put a hand on her forehead.

"Easy. Relax. It will be better if you can relax. Breathe."

She took slow, deep breaths, trying to keep the food down. He slipped his hand from her forehead to her stomach and rubbed her softly. She twisted under his hold.

"Don't," she said.

He took away his hand and was quiet for several moments. She began to wonder if she had offended him. She could smell him—beef soap, leather, greenwood smoke. And another smell, maybe sweat, that she associated with men.

After a time, he began to talk. His voice was calm and confident, and it soothed her. She liked the sound of the deep tones she heard vibrating through his neck. She nodded at the spoon, and he began to feed her again. His voice and the food made her feel sleepy and safe. *You're not safe*, she reminded herself, but her body eased.

"I wonder if you remember, but we have met before. My name is Sileph. I saw you in that Bayern prince's council in Ostekin. Enna, isn't it? I remember you well. How you stared at me! As though you wished to light me on fire with your gaze. How could I forget that expression? Your mistress the queen just looked down and didn't say moo. There is not much to her, is there? But not so with her maiden. I will admit I was struck with you. And I wondered what hair you hid up under that scarf."

She felt him finger a strand of her hair.

"Black as night. I've seen you three times at night. I don't think you know that, do you? First was in a snowstorm, and you burned our tent. It was dark, and I did not see your face well." He laughed lightly, and she could feel the rumble through her back. "We were mighty cold that night.

"Another time, I watched you in the woods outside this town. You crept up alone, hiding from tree to tree. You were fascinating. I found I would much rather watch you than stop you. I don't know how you do what you do, but I could see in your face that you enjoyed it. Would you like to set a fire right now?"

Even the suggestion of it filled Enna with hope, and she nodded breathlessly.

"Not on me, I hope. Why don't you set just a little one? Just this spoon?"

He held out the wooden spoon an arm's length in front of her face. She knew it yearned to be given life again, all those tiny, empty spaces inside it void of living juices, perfect to give root to flame. But she could not even feel that—not heat, not the lack of heat. Nothing. *He's trying to find out*

how much I can do, she thought. But his voice and the food loosened her resolve to keep him ignorant.

"I can't," she said.

"Ah. The drugs. They are powerful. What they are giving you is a mixture of several herbs, but it is the king's-tongue that is the key. So named, says the tale, for its insidious use on King Husilef, four kings before the present. His daughter fed it to him subtly for months. His mind slowed, his body weakened, and the damage after all that time was permanent. His daughter had him declared incompetent and became ruler in his stead. It could be rumor, I suppose, but there have not been any queens since, just in case."

The word *permanent* rang in her head like a ball in a bell. Sileph put down the empty bowl and continued to hold her. His head moved a little closer to hers, his jaw pressing lightly against her brow. It rubbed against her as he talked, and she felt herself drowsing.

"Have you always had this gift with fire?"

"No," she said.

"Of course. I've thought of something you said in the war council with your king, that the fire worker had taught no one his arts. It seems to me, then, that this is a gift that one can be taught, no? Enna, I want you to teach me."

Enna opened her eyes, and fear returned with a jolt.

"It would help your position here if you could be a teacher," he said. "Just to me. Show me how you do it and I can protect you."

An arrow of thought whipped through her drugged mind. *War*. She was forgetting the war. She had entered an enemy camp in an attempt to cripple them, and instead they were wrestling her weapon away for their own use.

And it would be even easier than they knew. Her eyes darted to the right side of her skirt. There, sewn inside the wide hem, was the vellum. She had wanted it to be safe, and instead she had walked right into the enemy's home, bringing the means to destroy Bayern. She had no idea how many Tiran would have the ability she and Leifer shared. Maybe hundreds, maybe none. But as Leifer had proved, even one could be devastating on the battlefield. Enna realized grimly that she had thought she could end the war herself, but she had not considered that she could do it from either side.

Her thoughts looped around one another, and she blinked hard to try to still them. He was waiting for her to speak, so she said, "I can't," again

because it was the easiest thing to say.

"Do you mean you won't?"

"I don't think it's possible."

Sileph took a breath. "Was that you out there burning on the battlefield?"

"No, my brother."

"And he taught you?"

"No," Enna said firmly. "He didn't teach me. It just happened."

In frustration, she had been trying to sit up and convince him with her effort that it was impossible. But the tent and ground tilted queasily, and she found herself back in his arms, her cheek pressed against his chest.

"I can't," she said into his shirt. "I can't think."

"Yes. With a clear mind you might find a way."

"The drug." Perhaps with that incentive, they would find a reason not to feed her the king's-tongue anymore. Then she could have her mind back and think a way out of there.

Sileph patted her hand. "Soon, I hope. Now I think you would like to stretch and wash. Tiedan wants a look at you tomorrow, and we should have you in some clean clothes."

Enna stiffened. They would take away her skirt. They could find the vellum.

"Don't worry, I will send in a woman to take your things," he said, mistaking the reason of her reaction.

"I'd rather not," she said, but he ignored her. He lowered her to the ground, pulled a knife from his boot, and sliced through her wrist and ankle binds. With the sudden release, slivers of pain drove into her arms and legs and ran in sharp shivers all over her body. She cried out. Sileph stopped and looked at her.

"You . . . you should not suffer." His voice trembled a little at the end. Enna stared up at him, mouth agape. She believed that he honestly felt for her. But a moment later when he called out to a sentry, his voice was low and commanding again.

Before she could test her strength enough to try to dispose of the vellum, Sileph returned with two guards and a Bayern woman wearing a blue sash. Sileph gave orders so quickly that Enna's slowed mind did not catch them completely, and then he left. The two guards stayed in the tent with their backs turned to Enna, ostensibly to make sure no illicit communication passed between the two prisoners.

The woman clucked and *tsk*ed as she undressed Enna, but her eyes were tender. Though perhaps only ten years Enna's senior, her face was lined and sun scarred. Eylbold was a farming town, and Enna imagined the years working fields were rough. She stared at the woman, caught up by her eyes, blue as the high, lonely sky. It was good to see someone's eyes. Enna wanted to tell her with her own eyes to ignore what she might feel inside the skirt hem, to just return it without a word. She shook her head in a silent plea. The woman surely did not understand the warning, but she returned a comforting nod.

Once Enna was stripped down, the woman washed her with a rag and warm water in quick strokes. Enna wanted to protest and say she could do it herself, then realized that she could not. So she just kept the woman's blue eyes, felt like a kitten washed by its mother's rough tongue, and thought of what she would do later, when she was free.

The woman wrapped Enna in a large wool blanket that vaguely itched against her bare skin and left the tent with the dirty clothes. The two guards followed her out. Enna could see they kept post just outside the tent door.

It was quiet. The tent got darker. Outside, she could hear campfires pop and hiss. She wanted that sound to feel comforting, like the voice of an old friend, but it seemed so far away. She did not want to be alone to feel how cold and untouchable the world was now, to feel the absence of the heat like heavy grief. Alone, her thoughts would catch and fling her back to the moment with Isi, the unforgivable moment. She winced again and again at the memory, and dark regret rode with her into sleep.

She heard a voice and woke slowly. The air and darkness felt like deeper night. The voice that had awakened her still vibrated inside her head. She listened to it again. A voice she did not know. A man's. She opened her eyes.

"There you are." It was one of the guards. He had removed his helmet, and his yellowish hair stuck up in a way that reminded her of Razo. He was in the tent, alone, looking at her.

"All nice and comfortable, are you? For a moment I thought you might be dead. Were you dead?" He smiled.

"No," said Enna, since he seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"Good, because I'm curious." He took slow steps toward her. "I wondered what a girl looks like who cooks people alive. A friend of mine,

Duris, he was sleeping in a tent just like this one when it caught fire somehow. Do you know how?"

She did not answer this time. In the near darkness, his face was disturbingly shadowed. That empty place inside her that she used to fill with heat was now sick with dread.

"You must be too good to answer to me, yes? Our precious little prisoner. Our resident fire-witch. Deserves death, but instead is washed and fed and guarded like a prized puppy. You took something away from me that night. Do I not get something in return?"

Ah, she thought, *ah, that.* He came toward her, and she fought rolling pains of disgust and the nauseating realization of her own powerlessness. Her limbs felt like stripped corpses. Her mind swayed like a motion-sick child rolling around in the back of a wagon. She concentrated on the pit of dread inside her and how to change it to anger, and how that anger could free her, wake her skin to awareness of heat again, loose the sleeping fire. He knelt over her, and his hands touched her blanket where she gripped it closed.

His voice was soft and mocking. "I just want to see what a fire-witch looks like."

She could feel the heat of his wet breath on her face. *Good. Heat. Go ahead,* she thought, *go ahead and touch me and let's see what happens.* But she held the blanket even tighter, a maddening grip that reminded her just how weak she was. She sobbed once and felt a little heat bubble inside her. His face leered over her, and she could see pale glints of his teeth. With his bony finger he stabbed her a few times in her side as though he were prodding meat or teasing a sibling. Then he grabbed the corners of her blanket and said, "Hush."

She heard the sound of the tent flap whipping aside.

The guard sprang to his feet. "Captain," he said with an effort at normalcy.

Sileph looked around wildly, at him, at Enna, back at him. Enna pulled a loosed corner of the blanket tight over her chest. Her hand shook like a baby's gourd-rattle.

Sileph's face tightened in rage. He rushed forward and released his fist into the guard's face. The punch sent the guard spinning to the ground. Sileph swore, looked down, and hit him again. And then again, and again, cursing him and his family and his stench and his greasy heart. The guard

covered his head with his arms and whined like a beaten dog. Sileph seemed unwilling to stop, and his fists shook with unspent fury, but he grabbed the man by his neck and the back of his tunic, ran him through the tent, and flung him out the door.

Sileph put a hand over his face and breathed hard through his nose, his entire body clenched up in a reluctant effort to calm. His forehead shone with perspiration.

Enna pushed herself up a little on her elbow. "You should've let him try." Her voice shook more than she thought it would. "He would've . . . I would've found a way . . . to burn . . . " She stopped, angry and humiliated, aware that even in anger the fire was a stranger to her drugged mind.

Sileph tightened his fists and looked around as though wishing for something new to hit. He pointed at her, and his voice trembled with rage.

"Nobody touches you." He paced a moment, put a fist to his mouth, discovered a trickle of blood from where he had bitten his own lip, and wiped it away angrily. "Nobody."

After a moment, when his breathing slowed, he sat beside her. Enna watched his face, amazed that this was the same man from the war council in Ostekin. She thought unexpectedly, *He's nothing like Finn.*

He sat for a few moments just looking at her, then said, "I am sorry, Enna," and stood to go.

"Wait," she said.

He turned back to her, his expression almost hopeful. She realized that she was going to ask him to stay and that was ridiculous, so she curled back up on the ground and said no more. Sileph waited a moment and then left.

Enna tried to keep her eyes open for as long as possible. Under her blanket, she rubbed her bare arms and tried to still her shivering muscles. She had never felt so empty.

Chapter 13

Early, when the tent walls began to brighten with shaded light, the tent flap moved again. Enna jumped, but it was only the blue-eyed woman with her clothes. The skinny man with his hard finger and hot breath and sneer was not among the guards who accompanied her. The woman dressed Enna tenderly. Her clothes smelled of beef soap and wood smoke. Enna ran her weak hand along the hem—the vellum was still there.

Sileph waited outside the tent until the woman departed, then entered quietly, a small water skin in his hand. Enna nearly sobbed.

"Please," she said, pride combating the pleading tone in her voice. "I want to be able to think and move again."

"I wish I did not have to. Tiedan spoke with me this morning. His orders are that you remain drugged." He uncapped a flask and held it to her lips. With his other hand he smoothed her brow. "Just a little. Just enough to hold the fire back. It won't be forever, not if they can find another way to protect themselves from you."

He began to pour and she gagged on the bitter water, her hands gripping his wrist. She coughed, gulped one, two, three swallows; then he allowed her to push his hand away. He wiped the dribbled water from her cheek with a corner of his shirt.

"You are very brave, Enna."

That one word was too much. Brave. She choked on it, clutched his wrist tighter, and started to cry. The fear and powerlessness were so overwhelming, Enna could scarcely remember who she had been. Sileph held her against his chest, smoothing her hair and rocking her slightly. His voice changed again, softer, lighter.

"You are, Enna. You are amazing. This is temporary. You will shine again, I promise. I will see you burn again."

"Why?" she asked.

He did not speak, just held her while the king's-tongue spread through her body, pressed down her hands and feet, and cooled her skin so that it felt dead. The pit inside her was empty and cold, and it weighed down her

chest. Soon she was aware of Sileph but could not feel him. Only her sense of smell remained completely keen. She pondered the smell of his leather vest—dust, smoke, oil, animal.

She looked at the dark hairs on the back of his hand and thought of him last night in his rage. What had he done to the hard-fingered guard? Was that guard now dead? Finn would not have killed him, but Sileph might. She wanted to ask him these questions, as well as others that would start with "Why?" But she was comfortable against him in her nearly numb body. And she liked his smell.

Smell was her only strong sense for days, as Sileph and the king's-tongue became her only companions. When the drug began to wear itself out, Sileph was there. She leaned against him and told him of home, of the Forest and being a worker in the city, of Leifer's death and how the queen tried to stop Enna from burning. She told him because she wanted his trust, sure that he was the best hope she had of someday escaping. And she told him because she wanted to. Those moments with Sileph, the grip of the king's-tongue loosening, were the times she felt a little like Enna.

She left the tent only to go to the privy. Sileph picked her up, one arm under her knees, one supporting her back, and carried her into the winter sun. She closed her eyes, leaned back her head, and let the light touch her entire face. The warmth and light made her feel pretty. Her skin tingled and her heart swelled, and she breathed deeply of the cool air that brought the tang of pine trees and warming earth. She had spent most of her life out of doors, and just leaving the confines of the tent felt like going home.

It also made her ache. Inside the plain, windowless white tent, her numb state seemed almost natural. Outside, with the sun and wind and colors and people and fires, she remembered dimly how much she used to feel.

Sileph always arranged to have a woman help Enna at the privy and then returned to take her back to her tent. Once he let her try to walk, holding her arm over his shoulders and steadying her with his other arm around her waist. It was almost fun for the first few steps to feel the rough ground under her thin boots and feel her ankles and knees move. But soon her legs crumpled, the drugged and unused muscles cramped and useless. In that moment Sileph swept an arm under her legs, held her again in his arms, and kept walking as though that had been their intention. Enna wrapped her arms around his neck and held his head close to hers.

Returning to the tent, the washed-out light and smell of close quarters, caused Enna a physical pain. Sileph said nothing as he settled her onto her blanket. She did not let go of his neck, so he knelt beside her.

"I walked," she said.

"Yes, you did." He contemplated her face. "Someday, when this is over, we will walk together in Ingridan. It is a beautiful city. Not as harsh and cold as Bayern. It lies by the sea on a river delta. Seven small rivers weave through the city, and there are white stone bridges and white houses and palaces and squares, and when the fruit trees are in bloom all the air is sweet."

She gasped with a sudden sob. The image was beautiful, and she felt so ugly. "King's-tongue. I feel sorry for that king. I know how he felt. It's cruel what his daughter did to get power."

Sileph's brow was lined. "People do cruel things when they are afraid. They need leverage against you, Enna. They need a way to be sure you won't burn the tents around them. That's why, I thought, if you could teach me how . . . "

"If you'll let me go, I'll take an oath never to . . . to never . . . "

Sileph's grip on her arms was tighter, and there was a touch of desperation in his voice. "I can't let you go, Enna. You have to try. If you can teach me the fire, I can protect you. Once I can wield the power as well, Tiedan will feel safer around you and revoke the order to keep you on king's-tongue."

"But there's the war . . . " Enna rubbed her eyes irritably, unsure what she should say. When she looked up again, Sileph was watching her shrewdly.

"The war." He shook his head. "Do you really think I'm your enemy?"

Enna studied his face. *Sileph. Enemy.* No, she could not reconcile the two.

He straightened, and his manner spoke of the soldier he was. "You deserve to know something, Enna. This war will not last long. We have been allowing the Bayern spies to count our numbers this winter because they cannot see the armies yet to march from Tira. Soon, very soon, Tira will overwhelm Bayern. Don't resist teaching me the fire because you believe you are saving Bayern. Bayern is already lost. Save yourself."

He drew closer and smoothed her hair away from her brow. "You are not a traitor, Enna. You are a survivor. All I am asking is for you to show me what you do."

A way out, she thought.

"Just you," she said.

"Yes, just me."

Sileph stayed with her during those hours when the king's-tongue began to loosen its grip on her mind and before her next dose was due. For Enna, they became the most delicious and grueling hours she had known. The first time she could gather heat to her, she nearly cried out. And then resisting, not lighting the fire for fear of revealing too much, made her sweat and shake. Never had the gift brought her so much joy or forced such a struggle for control.

"Tell me how it works," he said.

"There's a place in here"—she put a hand on her chest—"that I fill with heat. Just bringing it inside changes it, then I direct it into some fuel, and it becomes fire."

"Where do you get the heat?"

"I don't know. It's all around. I can't remember anymore."

She did remember. Living things give off heat. But she would not reveal all willingly. She tried not to think about that place in her skirt that felt a little heavier against her ankle.

Just as Enna had wished, because Sileph became more hopeful of learning, he put off the drug until later and later. They would sit together in the dark. Through a rift in the tent roof, a little moonlight slipped in and pooled on the surface of the king's-tongue water. It trembled in its cup like a threat.

Sileph would hold up a stick or piece of straw and say, "Concentrate."

She did. The later it was, the more she could feel him. Sileph. His heat leaving his skin, brushing by hers, rising against the shaft of moonlight and dispersing into the night sky. The nearness of the heat was intoxicating, and she would close her eyes and just feel it, play at drawing it near, imagine pulling it inside that dead space in her chest and feel the transformation to flame. Resistance sometimes took the little strength she had. Something about Sileph made her believe he was one who could be taught, and he might just be cunning enough to figure it out without reading the vellum.

"I'm sorry," she would say, and with a sigh he would nod and hand her the cup of drugged water. He always watched her drink it and stayed with her until the king's-tongue took effect. *So that I can't retch it up*, she

thought. *Or perhaps he just wants to stay.* He would hold her until she slept, and his smell and the faraway feel of his hands on her hair made losing herself to the king's-tongue just a little more bearable.

In those last moments before her hands and feet began to feel like leaded fishnets, Enna thought of escape. One night perhaps something would happen to take Sileph away, an emergency, a call from Tiedan. When that happened, she would be prepared to act.

The chance came several days later. Enna was feeling alert enough to sit up cross-legged. Sileph was unaware that this also meant she was able to feel not only his heat, but also the quiet hibernating heat of the grass roots beneath her legs and snakes of heat that came from the guards outside, slithering through the tent flap and up against her skin.

Enna wiped her brow as if she were exhausted from trying to light a fire, though she was in fact tired out from trying not to. It was as though the ghosts of all that had lived pressed against her body and begged for life. She found the sensation a thousand times more pleasant than the numbness of the king's-tongue.

"You long to do it," he said. "I know you do. I remember your face when you used to run in this wood sending tents and wagons into flames. Remember that feeling. It could help you. What does it feel like to burn?"

"Relief."

Sileph nodded as if he understood. "And what about burning as your brother did on the battlefield, a great deal all at once. Is that different?"

"I can't do more than little fires, a little at a time. Maybe his talent was different."

Sileph considered, then shook his head once. "No. If he could, then I have no doubt you could as well. You seem to grasp at the fire, trying to control it and still protect yourself. I wonder what may happen if you surrender instead."

Surrender. The word frightened her.

"He died, you know," she said. "He died from burning, perhaps from surrendering."

"If there is a way of mastering it, you will find it." He smiled briefly.

"Why do you take such an interest, Sileph?" she asked.

"The sooner we can show Tiedan progress, the sooner you won't have to take the king's-tongue."

“And that’s the only reason? For me?”

He leaned back, resting his arm on the ground, and looked at her unblinking, as though anticipating in advance what her reaction might be. “My father was a soldier in the king’s army. As was his father. I was born a soldier, and if I have sons, they will be born soldiers, unless I can change that.”

He cleared his throat and looked at his hands. Enna enjoyed the rare times when he seemed uncomfortable. One of the things she hated most about her king’s-tongue state was that he could not see her as she was, that he might not know that in will and strength she surely was his match.

“These times,” he said, “they allow for opportunities. I lead a fifty company; that is good for one my age. But I need to win more. You are so powerful, Enna. What you are, what you know, is an opportunity for me. But I also believe it is an opportunity for you, if you are willing to grab it.”

“So, what’ll you get if you become a burning man, Sileph? They’ll give you a spot of land? Or maybe more—a title, a statue in some square, or just the satisfaction that people in the streets will nod to you and give your wife the fatter cut at the butcher’s?”

“I expect military promotion and only that. The Tiran citizens would not know what to make of me, I imagine. We have no fire-witches in Tira, except in tales. And besides, I have no wife.”

Enna raised her eyebrows. “No? And you must be past twenty.” She sighed. “Well, I guess it’s no surprise you couldn’t catch a wife, a boy like yourself who goes around kidnapping poor girls and suffers such a sad lack of charm and good looks.”

“And you, my lady? A husband awaits you at home, or at least a betrothed?”

She gave him a glare that had won her many arguments in the past.

He leaned back a little as if in surprise. “No? But you must be near seventeen. Well, I guess that cannot be helped. It is a shame your mother couldn’t bear a girl with a witty tongue, or at the very least a pretty face.”

“You’re a rogue,” she said with some pleasure.

“Am I now?” He sat up on his knees, his hands full of straw.

She slugged him once on the shoulder and started to scoot away. “Easy,” she said, “what’re you doing? It’s not fair to attack a girl in a weakened state.”

“Oh, I think you are plenty awake, my lady, and I am under orders to test out your weaknesses, for future reasons of torture, of course.”

He began to pelt her with pieces of straw as though they were spears, and she batted them away. His look was one of deep concentration, though she noted the right corner of his mouth was twitching, as though his face fought his resolve not to smile.

“Ooh, that was a good throw,” he said.

She took in a sharp, mocking intake of breath. “You almost got my eye.”

She gathered up the fallen straw and began to hurl it back at him. As she dodged and threw, she found herself laughing.

“Captain!” The call came from outside the tent. Sileph stood, pulling straw from his hair, his demeanor losing all signs of playfulness.

A guard entered the tent. “Sir, you are needed immediately.”

“Yes, Pol.” He looked down at Enna with a frown, then said, “Drink the tea.”

Enna felt as though she had been slapped. *Who are you? Which you is you?*

“Drink your tea,” he said again. “I don’t know when I will be back.”

Enna snatched the cup angrily, spilling a little on her hand, and gulped down the liquid. It stung her throat to drink it that fast. She could feel her tongue begin to swell.

He watched her throat to make sure she swallowed and then stood there, giving it time to digest.

“You should come now, sir,” said Pol.

Sileph nodded and started to follow him out. He looked back. “I will return as soon as I can, Enna.”

She knew what he meant. He was always there when she took the drug, comforting her as it numbed her body and took away the world. Again she wondered, *Does he hold me to make sure I’m properly drugged or because he wants to?*

The instant he left, Enna scuttled to the corner of the tent and scratched up a flap of ground cloth. She jabbed at the back of her throat, vomited the clear liquid onto the ground, covered it up, and lay down before anyone came in to see her.

Some of the drug was already in her body. The dry, green taste of the king’s-tongue seemed to coat her completely—the taste was a film on her eyes, the chapped skin on her fingertips. Her hands felt heavy, and a mild

dizziness made it difficult to keep her eyes open. But she could still think, and dreams did not entangle her into fiery darkness. The mild effects would wear off soon, and then she would disable Sileph somehow (that thought still made her uncomfortable) and flee, burning her way out if necessary.

Enna curled up, trying to ease a sudden stomachache. *Get out.* That had been her thought all along, but now that the possibility neared, anxiety plucked at her. Where could she go? She had left nothing behind—she had tried to set fire to the queen, her closest friend, and she had nearly gotten Razo and Finn killed on their last raid. Leifer was dead. She knew she could not bear to return to the Forest again, the uneasy fire pulsing inside her, making her feel useless and small unless she burned. And if what Sileph said was true, if Bayern had no chance against Tira? Then there was no more home.

Enna cursed and slammed her fist against the hard ground. Her drug-numbed hand vibrated peculiarly. She looked at it as at a strange object and wished that she had somewhere to run.

There were more shouts outside. She was often too drugged to be curious, but now the noises tugged at her attention and her mind played at figuring them out. Not battle preparation. Not a celebration. *An intruder,* she thought.

Just then Sileph entered the tent. She sat up quickly as though she were caught doing something wrong and then remembered she was supposed to be drugged to unconsciousness. Weak dizziness took her, and she exaggerated its effects.

"Enna." There was eagerness in Sileph's voice, but also caution. "Enna, I have found our leverage. I have found a way to make them feel safe around you without the king's-tongue."

Her eyes widened, but she did not speak. She reminded herself, *You're drugged. You're nearly asleep.*

"It is good for us," he said. "Before you see what's waiting, you must remember that."

He picked her up like a baby and carried her out of the tent.

The first thing she noticed was a fire. It was night. She had not been around live fire since the night she razed the gallows. It was so beautiful in the dark, like gold cascades falling up into the air, dripping with heat and light. And she felt it, too, and recognized the desire that seeped from its

center, the desire to stretch and grow and consume and be freed. It was her desire. She was the smoldering embers in the pit.

The night was very cold, and Sileph's arms gripped her as though he wished to warm her as much as to hold her up. He walked a short distance, stopping before a gathered group of soldiers.

"Here is our answer," he said.

Her eyes still burned from staring at campfires, and here it was dark. She focused on what stood before her until her eyes grew accustomed to the night. Slowly, the people's faces resolved into clarity.

Standing between the soldiers, their hands tied behind their backs, their faces swollen and bloodied, were Razo and Finn.

Chapter 14

Their swords were gone. They breathed hard as if they had been fighting until moments ago. Razo had a scrap of cloth tied around his mouth—Enna did not doubt he had been cursing and shouting. And his hair, of course, stood straight up. A soldier beside him held a dagger at the point of his jaw as if prepared to slice his throat clean open.

Finn's mouth was uncovered, and his labored breath came rasping from his throat. In addition to his hands, his ankles were tied with rope, probably to stop him from kicking. Two men held his shoulders. Both Razo and Finn watched Enna, and their eyes were sad. They had come here, she knew, for her.

"No," Enna said softly.

"It is all right," said Sileph. "This is our chance, Enna."

"How dare you?" Finn spoke out with a rage that surprised Enna. "If you address her, you call her 'maiden'; she's not Enna to you!"

A soldier punched Finn in the belly. While he was doubled over, they gagged him with a filthy cloth someone pulled from his tunic.

"Let them go." Enna pushed her way out of Sileph's arms and landed on her feet. She wobbled, and Finn lurched forward as though he would catch her. Sileph grabbed her shoulders to steady her. She struggled out of his grip and fell to the ground.

"Listen to me," he said quietly, crouching beside her, "their presence gives you power now. You won't have to take the king's-tongue."

"But they can't be punished for me," she said. "They didn't do anything."

"They tried to sneak into a Tiran camp armed and outfitted for sabotage. They knew full well that—"

"No, they don't know anything. They're just stupid boys."

Enna saw Finn flinch at her words, and she rose unsteadily to her feet. "No, I didn't mean that. I just meant it's not your fault, it's mine, and I need to fix it."

She started to walk to Finn, unsure what she could do, just wanting to free them. Sileph grabbed her arms and held them behind her back.

“I will not let you hurt yourself for these boys,” he said quietly in her ear.

“Let me go,” she said. She felt dizzy, intoxicated, out of control.

“Take the prisoners to a holding room, double guard,” said Sileph.

“No!” Enna in a rage grabbed at any loose heat that would heed her and pulled it into her chest. The cold hollowness filled with heat and nearly burst, sending shivers through her body. Enna gasped at the pain.

Sileph shook her once and shouted quickly and urgently, “Enna, if you set fire to one bootlace, those boys will be killed.”

She shook her head, shuddering.

“They will, Enna. I swear they will.”

She had already pulled the heat inside her, and she had to expel it into flame or be burned by it. She kept her eyes on the guards who held Razo and Finn, despairing that freeing her friends meant endangering their lives. Her throat burned, her stomach burned. The pain of held heat shook her body, and it burned hotter and hotter. She screamed and sent the heat barreling into the nearest campfire. It exploded into flames the height of a man, blasting wood and embers into the night air.

Enna gasped for air again and again and felt her insides cool. The hollowness in her chest now was small and hard like a curled-up potato bug. She was weary and angry and sick, and she felt Razo’s and Finn’s stares like the disappointed heat that still pressed against her skin.

Sileph grabbed her shoulders and faced her to him. “Listen, Enna, those guards have orders. The moment you set a fire in this camp, they kill the shorter one there. You do it again, the second one goes. And they will be happy to do it. Those Bayern boys injured three of my men before they were contained. Do you understand? Are you sober enough to comprehend all this?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “yes, I understand. I burn, and you kill them.”

“Not just if you attack, Enna. If they see a fire spreading from its pit, a tent aflame, any fire loose anywhere in the camp, their orders are that the first one goes. Tiedan will take no chances with you.”

“It’s not fair,” she said through her scorched throat.

“It is the price. Any loose fire sighted and one dies.”

Besides the guards who held Razo and Finn, others stood by, two with nocked arrows, two with naked daggers. She felt defeat as real as if she had been beaten and bruised with it.

“I understand,” she said. The sting from holding heat too long, the night chill, and the effect of the drug all pressed and pained her, and she began to shake so badly that her teeth chattered.

“Come on,” said Sileph, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

Finn’s forehead furrowed in anger or confusion, and Enna shrugged Sileph’s arms away. Sileph glanced once at Finn and frowned.

“Back to the tent, girl,” he said sternly.

She waited for the soldiers to march Razo and Finn away before she followed Sileph into her tent.

“It is for the best,” he said.

“Whose best?”

He watched her as she sat and rested her head on her knees.

“Don’t you want to know why I saved their lives?”

“What?” She glared up at him, daring him to make himself a hero now.

He shrugged and looked a little like a young boy hopeful and unsure of himself. “I told the guards that they broke into camp to try to rescue you. Tiedan would have them killed if he knew that they were assassins.”

“Oh, stop with your Tiran rhetoric,” said Enna. “Those soldiers aren’t assassins.”

Sileph seemed surprised. “I meant . . . you know they came to kill you.”

Enna opened her mouth to protest, but the words dried in her throat.

“They came as assassins, Enna, so that Tira could not have you in its power. There was a third boy who threatened as much before my men killed him.”

“No,” she said, her voice a little higher, “they came to save me. I don’t know who the other one was, but Razo and Finn would try to rescue me.”

“Three people? Bayern sent three boys to pull you out of Tira’s war camp and expected success? Didn’t you notice how they looked?”

“Bruised, gagged,” she said defiantly. He waited for more. “And sad. They were trying to tell me they were sorry.”

“Sorry that they failed you? Or sorry that they had betrayed you?”

Enna started to answer, but her throat constricted, and she felt her lip tremble. It was ridiculous what he claimed, but she saw in memory their sad eyes, their worried brows. And who had been the third boy?

Sileph sat beside her. “I don’t want to talk at you and convince you that they meant ill. I thought you would have known the truth. But if Tiedan and the rest believe that they came to rescue you, then we can use the boys as

hostages. What I'm saying is, it would be wise if you pretended to care about those boys."

Enna met his eyes. "I do care. I . . . "

Sileph shook his head, and his jaw set in anger. "Those bastards. Sending *friends* to kill you, or worse, sending your friends to be captured and killed before you, and leave you knowing that no other rescue will come." He rubbed his jaw whiskers hard, keeping his gaze on her. "They must not value you at all, or you would not have come alone in the first place and would not now be subject to such a pathetic rescue."

Enna stared at him. Her wet eyes began to blur his image, and she could no longer make out his face. *Pathetic. Assassins.*

"Get out," she said.

"Enna . . . "

Enna stood and punched him in the jaw as hard as she could.

"Get out," she said. He did not move, so she swung again. He caught her arms by the wrists, his eyes flashing anger.

"Don't hit me," he said slowly, his jaw clenched. Enna's eyes widened, and she felt afraid of him for the first time. His grip on her wrists tightened, as if testing her strength; then he tossed her to the ground and left the tent.

Enna was alone for two days. The last of the king's-tongue seeped out of her body, leaving her muscles feeling thin and raw but workable. Her mind gradually became her own again. And as she felt heat once more and stuffed tiny bits into her extremities, she found that she was not cold for the first time in many days.

Alone, she paced in circles in her tent, waved her arms around, and tried to awaken and strengthen her ill-used body. When an opportunity came, she did not want weakness to prevent her from fighting or fleeing. But for two days the guards brought only water, and soon she huddled on the ground, wrestling down the pains of hunger, the renewed desire to set fire, and the fear that Razo and Finn had sworn her death.

Inside, deeper than the hollow spot in her chest, she did not believe they could be assassins. But Sileph's words still buzzed in her head, and she could not be sure. Regardless, she could not let her friends be killed. She would not burn.

On the third day, when the yellow shade of the tent walls told her it was midafternoon, Sileph returned. He put a hot loaf of bread and a slab of

cheese before her without a word and turned to go. He stopped, one hand on the tent flap as if reconsidering, then turned and sat cross-legged before her.

"Eat," he said.

She met his eyes with a glare that would speak for two days without food and the capture and beating of her friends. The lines of his face relaxed.

"We were both angry," he said. "I'm sorry."

He looked at her, and though she was prepared to refuse his apology, instead she found herself momentarily breathless. She had not really seen him, not in all those king's-tongue hazy days. His pale brown hair was tied back, exposing the angular shape of his face, the sharp line of his jaw, his dark brown eyes. Just now, there were tired lines around his eyes that made him look heartbroken.

"Go on," he said, and she gratefully looked away from him to her meal. The food was welcome, though not quite enough to keep her from wanting more. She brushed the crumbs from her fingers, readied herself, then raised her eyes to Sileph's again.

"You're a fool," she said.

Sileph nodded. "Don't say it took you two days to realize this."

Enna nearly smiled. Sileph was thoughtful for a few moments; then he closed his eyes as though shutting something out.

"Enna, from all you have told me, I assumed that Bayern had or would abandon you, and that those boys' clumsy assassination attempt"—Enna started to protest, and Sileph held up his hand and continued—"or rescue was just the final proof. But I understand now that you still had hopes of returning to Bayern. I was thoughtless. I know how I would feel were I betrayed by Tira, and I am sorry."

Sileph stood, pacing in the small space. "It makes me angry. How can they be so blind? If you were mine, I would not let you go so easily."

"Wouldn't you?" she said with some contempt.

He answered simply. "They are fools. They don't deserve you. To not only cast you off, but also to make so little attempt to bring you back? Huh. I'm not surprised, I suppose, when I think of that mousy little queen."

Enna winced. When Sileph spoke disparagingly of Isi, it was a temptation to agree and allow the persistent, pinching guilt to ease. But her heart would not allow it.

"Don't," said Enna. "Just don't. You don't know her."

Sileph nodded once. He knelt beside her and took her hands.

“Nevertheless, if they do not want you, we do. Tiedan has given me orders. You and I are riding out today—on a mission. If it goes well, things will change for you here.”

“What do you expect me to do, forsake Bayern?”

“Haven’t they already forsaken you?”

“Captain,” came a voice from outside the tent.

Sileph let her hands go and stood. His face was smooth, and his voice regained its public hardness. “Come in, Pol.”

Pol entered. She had seen him several times in her weeks there, but he never looked at her. None of the soldiers did, save Sileph.

“Horses are ready, sir.”

Pol handed him a bag and departed, and Sileph dropped it at Enna’s knees. Inside was a lady’s riding dress, deep brown and cut in the Tiran style with fitted wrists and waist. Also leggings, a wool hat and mitts, a jacket, new boots, and a filled water bottle with a long neck like the one Razo had filched for their costumed expeditions.

“Get dressed. We go when you are ready,” he said, leaving her alone.

Enna dressed quickly, feeling not only cold in those brief moments after she had flung off her worn Bayern clothes, but also vulnerable, vivid memories of the hard-fingered soldier leering before her, her only defense a thin wool blanket. She kept her old skirt on under the dress—they might think she wore layers for warmth.

When she emerged from the tent, she felt strange, the hat wonderfully warm but unfamiliar, the dress touching her in different places from her Bayern skirt and tunic. She felt as though she were no longer a prisoner but had shed herself and become Tiran. A thought scratched briefly against her good feelings: *that’s how he wants you to feel.*

It was a relief to be dressed so. As she walked through the camp with Sileph and several other Tiran soldiers, she felt like one of them instead of trapped by them. She knew it was an illusion, but at least it lessened her feelings of vulnerability. Then they arrived at the horses. Ten soldiers were already mounted. One on a large horse held another on the saddle before him. It was Razo, gagged, his hands bound.

“Why?” she said.

“For our protection,” said Sileph. “Whenever we go out, we will take one of your Bayern friends along.” He helped her mount a horse, then hopped

into the saddle behind her. He rested his head beside hers and whispered, “I trust you, but Tiedan does not.”

Enna looked at Razo. The soldier had angled his horse so that she and Razo could not meet eyes, but she could see a bruise and an unbandaged cut on the side of his face. She thought, *I’ll see Tiedan burn.*

“I can ride my own horse,” she said, thinking fondly of Merry and hoping she got home safely. *Home.* Was Ostekin the mare’s home? Was it hers?

One of the soldiers laughed at her request. “And let you gallop off to the Bayern? No luck.”

Sileph laughed, too. She could feel his laugh muscles against her back. “Not yet, my lady. You will earn that right in time.”

“And how’ll I do that?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her tighter against him, and kicked his horse into a canter.

They rode for a couple of hours, and as the winter sun descended and the horizon burned red, Enna felt more and more uneasy. Being kept in ignorance was as bad as being bound in ropes. She watched the gray ground slipping beneath them and caught a glint of metal in Sileph’s boot. A knife.

“Slow down,” said Sileph at last. The party came to a stop, and Enna looked around madly in the low, fiery light to see where they had come. Over the next rise was a farmhouse. Panic seized Enna as though by the throat. Why were they taking her to this remote place? Did they plan to torture her until she revealed how she controlled fire? Or would they make her watch as they tortured Razo? No, no, she would not let them.

She barely thought about her actions. Sileph dismounted and helped her down. She feigned weakness, wobbled over, and pulled the knife from his boot. In a swipe she brought it to his bare neck, her left hand holding the back of his head, clinging tight to let him know that if it came to a wrestle for the knife she would not let go until she had broken skin. His body stiffened, but he did not raise his hands to her knife hand.

“Let Razo go free,” she said.

The soldiers drew their swords, and three strung and armed their bows. Enna moved slightly so Sileph was partway between her and the archers.

“Untie him, give him a horse, and let him go or I kill Sileph and burn the rest.”

“Enna,” said Sileph.

She gripped his neck tighter and let the blade press slightly. She stood on the balls of her feet to reach him, and her hands were already shaking. She wondered why he did not try to disarm her, but maybe it was the fire and not the knife that he feared.

"Why aren't you moving?" said Enna. "I said let him go."

"They won't move without my command, and I won't give it."

"Tell them," said Enna. She did not look at Sileph's face. Looking at him was like being on king's-tongue, and she needed to think clearly. Maybe they would obey her if she lit one of them on fire. Then again, maybe they would kill Razo.

Sileph swallowed against the pressure of the knife and spoke softly. "Enna, I said I won't. If you want to do this, you will have to try to kill us right now. You might get us all before the arrows hit you or Razo. But whether you live through this and escape or die trying, as soon as word reaches Eylbold, Finn will be executed."

She strained to make eye contact with Razo, but his rider still held him away so that she could not see his face.

"You don't have to do that. Just let Razo go. I'll stay with you, I promise, and you'll still have Finn to use over me."

"No." She was close enough to him to feel that word rumble in his chest. "My orders do not allow it. You must choose now if Finn lives or dies. And if you are going to kill me, Enna, you will have to slit my throat. I am too close to burn."

He put his arm around her waist and she jumped, pressing the knife a little harder.

"Easy, easy," he whispered. "I am just showing you that I won't let go until you kill me or put down the knife."

Enna looked at the faces of the soldiers in the dying orange light. They would kill Razo if they could, and they would kill Finn. She believed they would have killed her already if not for Sileph. She could see the blood thirst in their eyes, like her own fire thirst now, the heat from their bodies and the horses tickling the exposed skin of her face and neck.

It was hopeless, but she was reluctant to lose her momentary advantage, and she leaned away from their arrows and closer to Sileph. Her head touched his neck, and she looked at the dark intimation of his shaven beard, the hollow of his throat, a small white scar on his chin. He smelled as familiar as Forest pines, as her mother's soap, and she realized with a cold,

achy thrill that she might be falling in love with him. And despite being a prisoner, despite Razo and Finn and king's-tongue and war and all, being there at that moment was in every way the fulfillment of all she had dreamed and longed for when feeling bored and unimportant on quiet Forest nights. She had a knife in her hand, fire aching in her chest, and a war captain by her side. Had she not wished to do things, to be involved in something bigger than herself, bigger than the Forest? *Oh, mercy, Enna,* she thought, *you would be this absurd.*

She grunted in defeat and threw the knife to the ground. Immediately the soldiers arranged themselves in formation, Razo in their center, all arrows pointing at her. Sileph waved them down and then laughed.

"Well, I am glad to get that taken care of." He wiped his neck and looked with delight at the smear of blood on his finger. "I was expecting something eventually, though I will admit that was a bit intense. What brought that on?"

Enna was not amused. Her anger was built, and there had been no release. And she was irritated at Sileph for tricking her into love.

"Why're we here, *Captain*?" she asked.

Sileph blinked once at hearing his title instead of his name. "I brought you here to burn."

Sileph signaled his soldiers, and most followed him on foot as he walked Enna toward the house. "There is something I can't get out of my mind, and that is the expression on your face when you were lighting fires outside Eylbold. It was pleasure. And relief. I know you must need to do it again, Enna."

She did not argue, not trusting herself to lie. Even the thought of it gnawed at her belly with excitement. "But why this house?"

"Tiedan's orders. It's an empty house, just to get you practicing again."

Enna's fingers tingled and her instinct shouted warning. But already the hollow place in her chest was expanding and heat gathered around her, expectant.

"No, I shouldn't," she said.

Sileph removed her mitts and hat and loosened the neck of her jacket. The heat now had more skin to touch, and the temptation was rich and inviting. Why was she resisting, anyhow? She was not a prisoner out here. Finn and Razo would come to no harm from this fire. Isi was miles away.

She pulled the ready heat inside her, converted it to the idea of fire, and sent it exploding into the roof.

Enna gasped as though she had been held underwater too long and just now could breathe. Flames clawed at the now dark sky. She could feel the heat of the soldiers behind her and used it to scorch the walls. She was tempted then to try the surrender Sileph had suggested and see just how far she could go, but she resisted, still cautious of Leifer's fate, still clinging to that last unbroken promise. And so, after a few rounds, her sense of the heat diminished, leaving her chest aching, tightened, and cold.

Then the door opened. Two figures fled the burning building, one of them beating at the flames licking his tunic. He fell to the ground, rolling away the fire. The other pulled out his sword in a defensive posture but quickly dropped it when he saw the number of soldiers gathered behind Enna. He fled behind the blazing house and emerged mounted. Before his horse took more than three strides toward Ostekin, a Tiran arrow thumped into his chest. He slumped over and tipped out of the saddle.

"No," said Enna. She swung around and faced Sileph. "You made me do this." She slapped his chest. "You made me attack my own people. How dare you?" She kept hitting him and cursing herself until he grabbed her arms and held her still.

"Stop it. Contain yourself, my lady." His grip tightened, and she stopped struggling. He met her gaze with his hard brown eyes. "This is Tiedan's work, not mine. How was I to know there were Bayern spies hiding inside. Did you?"

Enna froze, openmouthed. No, she had not known. Why not? Why had she not felt their heat emanating from the building? Perhaps, she admitted to herself, she had wanted so badly to burn again that she had not stopped and tried to sense them.

"Captain," said Pol. He pointed to where the first Bayern man had recovered from the fire and now ran to his companion's horse.

"Let him go," said Sileph. He whispered to Enna, "For you."

Arrows lowered, and the man mounted and galloped safely away.

Chapter 15

The company rode back in silence in the quickly dying light. Enna tried vainly to meet eyes with Razo, to see if he understood or if he condemned her. Her thoughts were blazoned with the harrowing image of the Bayern man with an arrow in his chest, but that eased when her sense of heat returned. That empty place in Enna's chest relaxed, and she was conscious again of the stallion's heat, the riders all around, and, most of all, of Sileph's arm around her waist.

On arriving back at the Eylbold camp, Sileph grabbed Enna's arm and walked her quickly to her tent. His eyes looked over everything they passed without seeming to see anything, and his lips tightened and twitched. He ordered the tent guards to remove themselves a few paces and followed her into the tent.

He held her before him by her shoulders to look at her face, then ran his hands along her arms to take her hands. "That was marvelous. Did it feel good?"

Enna blinked twice and frowned. "Yes," she said like a question.

Sileph smiled. The result was shocking. His eyes brightened, the creases around his mouth expanded, his jaw widened. Enna felt her insides chill nervously.

He laughed, lifted her by her waist, and turned her around. "Of course it did. You are amazing."

Enna stumbled as he set her down, and she tried to pry his hands off her waist. Her stomach still made her feel as though she were spinning.

"For weeks, weeks that seem like years, I have been longing to watch you burn, Enna. It is what you were made to do."

"Well, I don't know why you have. I'm not forgetting that a Bayern man died today. . . . " Her argument sounded lame to her own ears.

"Never mind that." He looked into her eyes with such focus that Enna felt herself flush. "Ever since I saw you walking through the woods of Eylbold, I have thought of you relentlessly."

“Oh, please.” Her voice cracked a little. She encouraged her indignation to flare up, angry at herself that this was exactly what she wanted to hear.

“I have wanted you to be with me,” he said. “I knew how we would be together, didn’t you? You must feel something.”

He grabbed both her hands between his, and she pulled them loose.

“Still you resist,” he said.

Outside she could hear a call from a sentry, and an answering cry, and the crackling of a near fire. She felt shut out from that world, as though in that tent only she and Sileph existed. She looked down at her hands and saw that they were still, which surprised her, as she felt both excited and afraid.

“You’re trying to trick me somehow,” she said. “I shouldn’t’ve talked so much. I should’ve remembered what I am here. We’re enemies.”

“Why? Why are we enemies?” He paced in his familiar way, and in his earnestness some of the stoic Captain Sileph pushed into his voice. “You have told me yourself, there is nothing for you in Bayern. Your family is dead, your queen does not trust you, your friends are assassins, and that Bayern spy might ride home and report you burn for Tira.”

Enna let her head bow and saw again that fleeing scout, the blazing house, and herself before it, no knife to her back, no arrow aimed at her chest while she burned.

“Oh,” she said, and felt a funereal weight sink her chest. “I burn for Tira.”

“We are not enemies,” he said. “You need not be a prisoner here, not now. Tiedan wanted you to teach me the fire, and he would have counted that a proof of loyalty. No matter that you couldn’t. What you did today, that is our answer. Burn for Tira. Help me end this war quickly. And then . . . ”

His voice softened, losing its tones of exultations, melting down to woo her with the sounds. He held her hand in his, rubbing his thumb against her palm. “And then you and I return to Tira, honored warriors. I will buy you a large house in Ingridan. You will command a circle of servants, and at need we will serve the king in securing the country against foe and calamity.”

He took her other hand. She did not pull it away.

“This house,” she said, “it’d have plenty of hearths?”

He laughed and smoothed the hair from her brow. She remembered his doing that before, during the drugged days, but she had never felt much about it then. His eyes moved over her hair, her cheeks, her eyes, her lips.

One hand shifted to the small of her back, the other held the back of her head, his thumb caressing her cheek.

"Hearths and wood," he said, still smiling. He leaned in closer to her, his voice softening to a whisper. "We'll keep a hay field just for you to burn. And sticks, and straw, and tents, all the tents you want . . . "

He kissed her lips. Her eyes closed for a moment, and she thought of nothing but the volume of her heartbeats banging around inside her head. Her hands trembled now in earnest. She hesitated, then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Part of her was still hesitating. She thought of Sileph's advice on how to burn as Leifer had—*surrender*. She took that advice now, but not to make fires. She let go of fears and just let herself feel.

* * *

Enna was in love with Sileph all week. It was a relief to give up the struggle against him. They dined by his fire and walked together through the camp, smirking at how everyone else still saw them as master and prisoner. He was often gone, serving Tiedan and seeing to war matters, and Enna sat alone in her tent and missed him.

"There was no need for the king's-tongue after all," said Sileph when he returned.

"Without it, I'd've burned you all out of your boots."

Sileph laughed and kissed her hand.

"And Razo and Finn—they can go free?" said Enna.

"Soon," he said.

And they continued to ride out. The first time with a bound-and-gagged Finn, but on subsequent missions with no hostage at all. She burned another house north of Eylbold, and this time Enna had Sileph make certain no one was inside. The next day she burned two wagons full of supplies hidden in the cleavage of two hills. Then another house. When it proved to be a Bayern outpost and a spy ran out, she screamed, "Surrender! Surrender!" before he could try to flee and be downed by an arrow.

She was growing used to the pattern, the long, breathtaking rides, the open sky, the thrill of the fire, Sileph behind her on the horse, Sileph beside her as she burned. And when she questioned if what she did was right, he was there to assure her and comfort her and allow her to keep burning.

Then Sileph was gone for two days. Enna paced in the tent, lighting bits of straw and blowing them out again. She could hear a lot of activity in the

camp. More soldiers arrived from the south. Weapons were sharpened, wagons loaded with supplies. Around the fires at night, the noise was boisterous and excited. Enna lay on her side, watched the firelight spark through the tent cracks, and fell asleep wishing to join the camp.

It was dark when she awoke, the tent walls a night silver from the watch fires' glow, the camp quieted to a drowsy murmur. Someone was in the tent. She started, thinking of the hard-fingered soldier, then realizing that this time she could scorch him where he stood. Then, again, she remembered that if she burned, Razo and Finn died.

"Who's there?"

"Sileph." He knelt beside her. "Did I wake you? Oh, your skin is cold." He smoothed her blanket over her, tucking it around her sides.

"What is it?" asked Enna.

Sileph sighed. "It is time to march. My company joins a small army going east at dawn to see to another Bayern town. You are coming with me."

"To burn?"

"Yes. It is time to burn as you were meant to, Enna, end the war and be done with it. You are our hope."

Enna curled up on her side. "All right," she said sleepily.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly. Sileph stayed beside her, touching her hair, and she did not respond, acting as though she slept. She wanted him to leave so she could decide what to do. It was too hard to think clearly with him so close. *End the war swiftly.* Yes, that sounded good, but she could not burn people. She wanted to cling to this rule and hoped it would somehow save her. Sileph stroked her hair, and Enna exhaled softly.

She found herself thinking of another time in a tent when she pretended to sleep, Finn beside her, his hands curled on his chest. *All I ever wanted was to be close to you.* They were so different, those two boys. Of her, Sileph wanted so much more than just to be close.

After a time, Sileph carefully lifted his hand from her head and whispered, "Are you sleeping?"

Enna did not answer. She heard Sileph stand and slip out of the tent. Immediately she opened her eyes, folded her arms, and smirked at the tent flap. He did not know her so well after all if he thought she could sleep on this night. Before her thoughts could begin to untangle the decision before

her, a quiet conversation in the distance stirred her curiosity. She sat up to listen.

"There he is, our sharpest arrow."

"Captain Tiedan," Sileph said with respect.

"And the . . . ?" said Tiedan.

"Sleeping," said Sileph.

They're talking about me, Enna thought. She crawled across the tent and peered through the flap.

"Your Pol came to me a month ago with some doubts," said Tiedan, "thought you were attached to the girl, thought you would not make her burn for us. I told him I would give you some space and wait, and my instincts were correct."

"Yes, sir."

"Your troops are ready for the morning march?"

"Yes, sir, we leave at dawn."

"Good. Make as much of a ruckus as you can. Burn farms along the way. If your plan works, my own troops will be marching in two days." Enna could see Tiedan press his lips together and look at Sileph carefully. "The war is not yet won, but I believe some congratulations are due. I doubted your idea at first, but I see now that your every design, from building the gallows as bait, to the king's-tongue, to using her little friends, has been a decisive success. I think you will not long remain a fifty captain."

Sileph nodded once. "I thank you, sir."

Then Tiedan stepped in closer and whispered earnest words. Enna did not catch them, but she had already heard enough.

It was a relief when dawn came. Enna was tired of hating and cursing herself and pounding the cold ground. A shard of sunlight jabbed through the tent crack. Enna stood, waiting. Sileph entered, handsome, excited, ignorant.

"You are up? Good. It is time. . . . "

Enna crossed the tent and punched him in the jaw.

Sileph grabbed her wrists. "What are you . . . Are you crazy?"

"You lying son of a goat. I should burn you." Enna bared her teeth at him. It had felt good to hit him. Very good.

"What are you talking about?" he said, shaking her.

“All the time about Tiedan: Tiedan insists on the king’s-tongue; Tiedan holds your friends as hostages; Tiedan wants you to burn. Perhaps you should tell Tiedan what he’s doing, then, because he certainly seemed to think it was all you last night.”

Sileph stared at her a moment, his lips parted. He blinked and tried to resume his air of confidence. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, stop it, Sileph,” she said, pulling her arms loose and pushing him a step back. “You’ve been lying to me since I was unconscious. I’m a prisoner because of you and only you. You said you let that Bayern scout go free for me. Ha! You probably let him go so he’d tell Bayern I’m burning and I couldn’t return.”

“I—”

“Hurry, quick, think of another lie.”

Sileph rubbed his brow roughly. He shook his head, staring at the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said lamely.

“Mmm-hmm,” she said, unimpressed, sounding to herself like her mother when the children had been naughty.

“Have you never lied, Enna?” She started to argue back, and he raised a silencing hand. “Just listen to me for a moment, all right?”

Enna shut her mouth emphatically and glared.

“Thank you,” he said. “I have lied. I have lied and tricked and done everything I could think of to get you into this camp and keep you here. This is the part that you can believe—I want you here. With me. Now that you know that, nothing else should matter. You are still coming with me, Enna. Today. Now. We are burning together and we are ending this war, and then when we are in our big house in Ingridan you can harangue me in front of all the servants about my lying days.”

He smiled at her, his sweetest, handsomest smile, and reached out to take her hand. “Come on, Enna,” he said gently.

She slapped his hand away and laughed. “You are goat kin if you think that’s all it would take. I’m not going, not now, and if you tie me and take me I *will* burn, I swear it, but wherever I please.”

Sileph stared at her with such surprise, Enna wondered if anyone had ever said no to him before.

“Captain Sileph,” came a call from outside, “the troops are ready to march.”

“In a moment,” he yelled back angrily.

Enna glowered. “Go on, Captain, your army’s waiting.”

Sileph tightened his jaw. His face was red. “You will change your mind. When battle after battle the war does not end, and your precious Bayern stubbornly resists, willing to be wiped out entirely rather than surrender, then you will know you could stop it, decisively, beautifully. You will want the war over then, and you will come to me.”

He hesitated at the door, as if still expecting her to change her mind and go with him right then. She folded her arms.

“I am not letting you go, Enna. I will be back for you, and you will come.”

He swept the tent flap out of his way and was gone.

Enna slumped down on the ground and cursed herself richly. She had acted boldly, but she felt torn up, split like a log. Her heart was hammering out a rhythm in her skull, and her stomach felt iced over. She was the greatest fool of all.

Chapter 16

Enna was uprooted. She could not stay, but she had nowhere to go. She would not burn for Sileph, and she could not burn against him in Eylbold for fear of hurting Razo and Finn. Never had she felt so imprisoned.

Leifer was dead. She had no more family, and the impatient nature of the fire that was a part of her now would never allow her to return to the slow, quiet life of the Forest. One night she had dreamed of the Forest reduced to steaming black stumps.

And what of Isi? She had tried to kill the queen. Enna had not thought that word before—*kill*. And now she had set fire to Bayern outposts and witnessed the death of at least one of their scouts. If she returned, she might be jailed or even executed for treason. How could she explain? No, she could never go back.

Razo and Finn. Perhaps when the war was over, she could agree to go to Tira with Sileph on condition of Razo's and Finn's release. The desire to burn rose blazing in her chest like a cough, and she choked it down. It worsened after Sileph's departure, and Enna wondered if without an enemy to burn, without targets like the gallows or Bayern outposts, if the fire would slowly consume *her* instead. Maybe, she thought bleakly, when Sileph came back from his current mission, she might agree help him end the war. She shook her head at how quickly she had changed from being tormented by desires to burn Tira to a willingness to burn Bayern. Just like Leifer. Perhaps Isi's warning had been right after all.

Two days after Sileph had ridden east with a small army, Enna heard a second army depart Eylbold. The camp was quieter after that and her evening stew a little thinner. As night softened the camp, several soldiers built a fire near the tent, and through her tent crack Enna watched the flames and their hot, twisting colors. She found herself daydreaming of Ingridan, Sileph's city of white arches and houses and bridges spanning blue rivers, and of being a Tiran warrior, a fearsome and famous woman.

From just beyond the fire, the tones of a Tiran woman caught her attention. All the Eylbold women she had seen were Bayern, and, curious, Enna eavesdropped on her conversation with some soldiers about her ride up from Folcmar and passing news of the war. In addition to some message from Folcmar, the woman brought several skins of wine that she passed around. Enna could hear the sounds of drinking, and the laughter and conversation took on a slightly higher pitch.

"They sent you carrying messages alone from Folcmar?" said a soldier.

"Now, sir, why should I be afraid to ride through my own country?" There was a pause. "Is this not Tiran land?"

Several soldiers laughed. "Indeed, lady, it is, and will remain so."

Enna felt irritated by their talk, and she was tired of waiting. She burst out of the tent and was immediately stopped by her two guards' crossed spears.

"Back inside," said the larger one.

"Sileph said I could join the camp," Enna lied.

"The captain said to keep you hidden away until he returned, witch. Back in."

"Ooh, is that the fire-witch?"

Enna met eyes with the Tiran woman and could not stop her mouth from widening into a silent gasp. It was Isi.

Enna almost did not recognize her in the Tiran clothing and speaking with a Tiran accent. But she knew her. And she clutched at her stomach to keep herself from crying out. Isi's yellow hair was uncovered and cut to her shoulders in the fashion of a laborer.

"Yes, that is the fire-witch, our own little Bayern demon," said a soldier with some disdain. He prodded Enna back inside by a spear tip. She sat down by the flap and watched through the gap.

"I have never seen a fire-witch before," said Isi in her perfect accent. That had always been her talent, Enna remembered. When Isi had first come to Bayern, she had imitated the Forest accent to hide her identity, and she could distinguish different bird sounds and repeat their words so perfectly, a crow thought she was another crow—or, apparently, a Tiran another Tiran. "May I go in and talk to her?"

"No, not a chance. This is no ordinary prisoner. This is our captain's special pet."

Enna winced at the word, and she saw Isi raise her eyebrows.

“Is that so? Would this be Captain Sileph, then? A great leader. He has his way with words, does he not?”

Some of the soldiers snickered.

“I heard a tale once,” said Isi, “of the gifts of languages. Do you know it? How in faraway places, there are people who can speak with birds or horses or rain, and some when they speak to other people have the unnatural power to persuade, their every word a kind of magic? Once in Ingridan I heard Sileph speak and wondered if he had not just walked out of that old tale.”

“Indeed,” said a guard.

Enna’s skin tingled with an icy chill. Isi was trying to tell her something —Sileph had the gift of people-speaking. *A dangerous gift*, Isi had said once. *When one with this gift speaks, it’s not easy to resist the power of their persuasion. It’s difficult not to adore them.*

Alone in her tent, Enna scowled. *Honey-tongued goat bastard.*

“Do you know some tales, then?” said a soldier out of Enna’s sight. “Go on. It has been a long night since we have had entertainment.”

There was a rumble of agreement.

“All right, but just one, as I am to ride back to Folcmar tonight.”

“Slave drivers,” someone said sympathetically.

Isi closed her eyes as though visualizing the story. “In a mountain kingdom, a landslide awoke a long-defeated dragon. She stretched her neck, sharpened her claws, and tore her way out of the cave. In the rush to freedom, the dragon burned the nearest village, gorged herself on cattle, and returned to her cave to sleep on her bulging belly.”

“Oo-hoo, I would like to try my hand at one of those beasts,” said a young soldier.

“They are not real, you fool,” said the guard.

“Oh,” he said, and hiccuped from the wine.

Isi cleared her throat. “So. A brave prince rode to the cave on his fastest horse. He entered, quietly stepped over burnt cattle bones and charred bits of armor, and got close enough to spear the beast through the eye. But it had been long since one of his kingdom had faced such an enemy, and he did not know that the great old wyrms slept with eyes half-closed and nostrils wide open. When he neared, the dragon woke and raked her mighty tail against the cave wall. The prince stumbled away from the falling rock and was trapped against the cave wall by a barrier of unmovable rubble.”

Occasionally Isi batted the air around her face or paused a moment, gazing at nothing, but for the most part she seemed as much in control as she could be. Enna thought of that tea Isi took to help deaden the wind's touch, and she guessed that Isi had taken some recently. It might keep her mind focused, but Enna also knew it lessened her skill with wind and made her more vulnerable. The thought made her proud and sad, like watching a bird battle a cat to save her chicks.

Isi looked right through the crack in the flap as though she could see Enna watching, could meet her eyes. "The prince's many friends wanted to rescue him, but it was useless to try to get past the sleeping dragon. So they waited near the cave for an opportunity. For a great while, none came." She looked back at the soldiers. "When at last the dragon stirred, she took flight directly toward another village. The prince's companions knew they had a choice—free the prince or protect the land. With heavy hearts, they turned their mounts to the flying dragon and sped toward battle."

Isi stopped. There was a silence in which all Enna could hear was the fervent crackling of the fire as it feasted on a green pine bough.

"So, then what happened?" said a soldier.

"That is all I know of the story," said Isi. "What do you think happened?"

"I guess the companions caught up to the dragon and slew it, and then went back to rescue the trapped prince."

Isi smiled. "That would be a very good ending."

"Or," said another, grumbling that the tale had no ending, "they all got toasted, no one knew the prince was trapped, and he died, too."

"Yes," Isi said softly, "that could be an ending, too. Or perhaps while the dragon was gone, the prince found a way to free himself, though digging himself out of a collapsed cave could not be easy."

"Hmph," said one of the guards, his voice slurring slightly. "If you do not mind my saying, lady, you are fine at telling tales but lousy at ending them."

"But you bring good wine," said another cheerfully.

Isi wished them well and stood to leave, glancing once again at the tent flap, her eyes sad. Enna watched her depart and felt as though Isi had tied a string to her heart and pulled it as she walked away. Enna remembered Isi once bemoaning the fact that she did not have the gift of people-speaking. To Enna's mind, Isi did not need it.

Isi had come all that way just to tell Enna in a story that they could not rescue her. The thought made her chest burn. She thought of Sileph's assessment of the queen—a mousy woman with covered hair and lowered face. He never could have foreseen Isi entering the camp disguised as a Tiran woman, risking her life just to comfort her friend.

There were two details that kept returning to Enna's mind and twisting her heart with a painful wonder. First was that in Isi's story, Enna had been the royalty and Isi the friend. And second, the possibility that just to disguise herself as a Tiran, just to tell her a story, Isi had cut off her hip-length hair.

Enna sat by the slit in the tent, hugging her knees and thinking about her quickly shifting future. An hour before, she had been ready to give up on Bayern and run off to the enemy country with a smooth-speaking captain. She had thought her friendship lost, but Isi would not let her go. The rumor of the campfire's heat threaded through the tent flap and battered at her skin, but her chest filled with a different kind of warmth. She yearned to do something, right then, to show her loyalty to Isi and Bayern.

Enna grimaced as she ripped open her Bayern skirt and pulled out the vellum. The leather was supple from sitting so close to her body heat. She ran a finger over the black writing, letting random phrases catch her eye: *Heat remembers that it was once a part of something living, and it seeks to be so again. That small, hollow place. Burns best in what once lived.*

She could destroy it right now. Isi had not believed the power for creating fire was contained in the vellum, just the knowledge of how to do so. But what could happen to Enna's gift with fire if the vellum was not just hidden but reduced to ashes? It felt like a worthy risk. But she hesitated, read over it one last time, rubbed the vellum between her fingers. She sighed a surrendering sigh, pulled in the loose heat from the fire, and lit the vellum. A corner burst gold as flames crawled up its side. She held the far corner until the bite of the heat was blistering, then threw it on the ground, stomping out the ashes before the ground cloth lit.

And then she closed her eyes and just felt. Cold air swirled around her; then a stab of heat came in from the fire through the flap. Wrapped around that heat thread was the paler heat from the guards and bare wisps from the nearest trees. The hollow place in her chest throbbed, ready to take it in at her will. The vellum was gone, and nothing had changed.

She rubbed her forehead and thought of being angry or upset, or even relieved, but she could not pretend surprise. She had wanted to show herself that she was willing to give it up, just as Isi had been willing to cut her hair and risk her life. But she admitted to herself that she had not really believed burning the vellum could take away the knowledge that seemed to be branded into her mind and mingled with her skin, until she could not remember what life had been before fire.

From what Enna could hear through the tent walls, there was no end to the wine Isi brought, or it was particularly strong, for the soldiers seemed to get drunker by the moment. Even Enna's tent guards were sitting on the ground now, laughing and hooting at some slurred joke. She heard someone say "Bayern" and leaned forward to listen better.

"They won't know to run . . . to run or what."

"Bayern don't know terror till they have met Captain S-SSileph."

"It is Tiedan leading the army to the capital. Sileph's just going to Fedorthal."

"I know, I know." The speaker began to giggle. "But isn't the plan mav . . . marvl . . . fine? To attack some out-of-the-way place like Fedorthal and draw their army there, only to send our biggest force to the capital when no one's looking."

"Who would suspect us to march right on their capital? I wish I were going."

"You would be, you cowherd, if you had not been on watch duty twice when her highness the fire-witch there had come a-burning."

Enna stood, pacing again in the small space. Sileph harassing Fedorthal, Bayern responding and leaving the capital exposed, Tiedan on the march to the capital. She had to act. Sileph had seduced her with his people-speaking lies, but maybe Bayern was not lost after all. Besides, what of the augury? It said that Bayern would win, but with Enna's help. For a time, she had forgotten.

This was Enna's chance to set things right. Perhaps she could still catch Isi, warn her, and be back before they noticed and harmed Razo and Finn.

The soldiers outside had grown quiet. She peered out the flap. The guard and three soldiers she could see were asleep, the others gone. Scarcely believing it could be so easy, Enna slipped out into the chilly night.

The camp was quiet. Most of the soldiers stationed there must have marched with Sileph or Tiedan. If only she could catch up with Isi. There

was little chance of finding Razo and Finn, freeing them, and getting to Isi in time, so she would have to get back to her tent before anyone noticed she had left. Trying to look casual and still not make noise, Enna picked her way through the sleeping bodies and toward the edge of camp.

"Stop there, fire-witch." Two soldiers returned carrying a pot of stew. Their cheeks were a rough red. "Just where are you so set on going?"

"To the privy," she said, nearly spitting at them with the words.

The heat from the soldiers and their fire was crashing against her skin as though it sensed her anxiety and wanted to aid her. Suddenly, everything looked like fodder. For a time, Sileph had tricked her into forgetting that Tira was her enemy. But the fire needed fuel, and she needed an enemy, and the two had converged once again. The urge had not been so powerful since the night she burned the gallows.

"Not without us, you don't. We will be glad to help you."

One of the soldiers grabbed her arm with a sickly smile. She pushed him off. He stepped closer, gripping the neck of her dress and pulling her face close to his. His breath was thick with the sweet, rotten-fruit smell of drunkenness. His hands were hot.

"Don't provoke me, my lady fire. All I need is one reason to kill you right now and call it an accident."

"Get your hands off me, pig-boy," she said through her teeth.

"That is a pretty good reason." He shoved her back and took up his sword.

As he raised his sword for a neck swipe and the other drew his sword, Enna pulled in heat and sent it into both their hilts. With a painful gasp they dropped their swords. Enna sucked the heat out of the metal to cool them, sent it into the still blazing fire, and picked up both swords. She held one aloft, the blade pointed at the neck of the nearest guard, and said in a low voice, "Call out or dash away and I'll either run you through or burn you up, whichever's easier."

Enna did not know how to use a sword and did not dare start a fire lest it spread and warn Razo and Finn's guards, but the drunken men believed her threat, nodding with frightened wide eyes. One took a step backward, slipped onto his rear, then looked at her as though she had made him do it. With a sword, Enna cut a length of rope off the nearest tent and told one to tie up the other. Then she cut more rope, letting the tent slump down, and

tied up the second man. She hacked two pieces of fabric from the tent for gags and, smiling, turned to leave the camp.

And smelled burning cloth. The tent had fallen into the fire pit and was blazing.

Razo and Finn. Their guards had orders to kill them at the first sign of unusual fire. In panic, she sucked the heat out of the burning tent, enough to extinguish the flames, and with the heat raging in her chest looked around wildly for a place to send it. Nothing. She let it go on the bare ground, and the fire burst in a brief, bright explosion.

"What's all this?" The inebriated soldiers around her tent stirred at the sudden pop of her blaze. She was tugging the fallen tent away from the campfire, but it had lit again. One of her guards stood and began to shout, "Fire, fire!"

"Hush up. There's nothing. It's fine."

But he continued to shout. Across the camp, Enna heard the answering calls from sentries: *"Fire!"* She cursed, abandoned the tent to its flames, and ran toward the center of camp. Two of the soldiers roused and called after her, "Stop there! Fire-witch escaped!" She heard swords ringing free of sheaths. She could not stop to deal with them now. With a backward glance she sent fire into their swords.

The screams that followed stopped her cold. She looked back to see a soldier beating at the flames that clawed up his tunic. She rushed back, sucking the heat from that fire and setting the ground before him ablaze.

"I didn't mean . . . " Her stomach turned to see she had broken that rule again, as she had with the sentry, as she had tried with Isi. Keeping her promise felt like her only safeguard against losing herself completely to the fire. She looked around—soldiers yelled across camp to one another, one tent was crushed to black remains fuming smoke, one beside it split with fresh flames. The soldier lay before her, his tunic still smoking, and he watched her with angry, fearful eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said to him. "But Razo and Finn, and Bayern, they're more important." She fought a wave of nausea at her resolve as she turned and ran, but she knew now that to save them and stop the war, she would have to break all her rules, even the one that killed Leifer. Eventually she would have to surrender to the fire.

She raced through the tented camp to the town. To add to the confusion, she scorched the tents in passing. Wherever sentries or soldiers tried to stop

her, she sent fire, hopefully into their blades and bows, but she did not look back.

The first building she reached appeared to be an old barn. Only one young guard stood before its bolted door, staring at her with wide eyes, holding up his sword in defense. She heated his sword and he dropped it, his expression barely changing, as though he had been expecting that. She held up her two swords to his throat, but they were too heavy, so she dropped one and held the other with both hands.

"Where're the two Bayern boys kept?"

The soldier shook his head. *Burn him*, prompted the fire. The excitement of burning was simmering in her, heating her up for more action. She felt invincible and dangerous and at the edge of surrender, the means to burn more than she ever had before. But she resisted, for now.

"I think you should run now," she said, and he did not delay.

Inside, several taken Bayern women and some townsmen stood in the center of the barn, fear in their faces. Enna recognized the blue-eyed woman.

"Where're my two friends?"

"In the old merchant's house," said the woman.

"Show me." Enna took her arm and hurried her out of the barn. Behind them, the Bayern prisoners fled, two picking up the swords Enna and the guard had dropped.

Enna let the woman lead her through town while she scanned for soldiers. She continued to send flames into tents, wagons, anything that was Tiran made. She was not conscious of having to pull the heat from anywhere—it seemed to follow her now, hover around her like a swarm of wasps. The woman struggled to loose her arm from Enna's.

"What're you doing?" Enna asked. "I need your help."

"Yes, I'll help, girl," said the woman, rubbing one arm with the other, "but you're so hot."

Enna glanced down at herself. Her clothes appeared to be steaming faintly in the cold air. She nodded. "Lead the way."

They ran to the house and found it guarded by four soldiers. One held his sword to the throat of a bound, blindfolded Finn. Enna did not hesitate. While still advancing, she set fire to three soldiers' leggings. They screamed and dropped to the ground, trying at once to put out the fire and move farther away. The soldier holding Finn blinked.

“Kill him and you’re dead,” said Enna. “Drop your sword and I’ll let you run.”

He blinked again, let his sword fall, and scurried down the dark street.

Enna ripped off the blindfold and sawed through the ropes around Finn’s wrists and ankles. They fell, revealing raw, red welts. Enna hissed at the sight, and that place in her chest yawned, aching for heat. She met Finn’s eyes. He would have a scar down his cheek when a cut there healed, and his eye was green with an old bruise, but he smiled.

“Hello, Enna,” he said, his voice creaking from disuse.

“Hello, Finn,” she said softly. The heat around her dissolved for a moment. She felt her heart beat in that emptiness, and for the first time in weeks she felt something like good, clean hope. Shouts from down the street were getting closer.

“Razo?”

“Inside,” he said.

“More guards?”

Finn shook his head. Enna pushed them both in the door and out of view of any archers, gave Finn her sword to loose Razo, and turned to the blue-eyed woman.

“Have you heard anything?” she asked.

“Sileph’s army marched three days ago, Tiedan’s yesterday. Don’t know where Sileph went, but I heard Tiedan is headed for the capital. They’re marching west of Ostekin.”

Enna smiled. “You’ve heard quite a bit. Thanks. Now we could use horses.”

The woman pointed to the near end of camp.

“You should get out of here, and let others out if you can,” said Enna.

“All right,” she said, but stopped to put her fingers on Enna’s forehead. She frowned. “Be careful,” she said, and ran out of the barn.

Enna turned to see Razo and Finn, both armed with swords, both looking skinny, sickly, and anxious, but also a little pleased.

“Oh,” she said, “they’ve been so cruel.”

Razo shrugged, then winced in pain. “We’re all right. You look pretty good, pretty well fed and all. That’s a nice dress.”

“It’s new,” she said, despising herself. “I’m sorry, Razo, Finn. I’m just so sorry.”

Razo shrugged, then winced again. Something in his manner reminded her fiercely of Leifer. She nearly sighed in contentment just to be speaking with Finn and Razo again. She had thought she was alone, but she knew now that she had been wrong. Razo, Isi, and Finn felt like her last family, and one that she was determined to keep.

"You've got to stop shrugging," she said, almost laughing. "What happened to your shoulder?"

"It was that captain, uh, Silver or something. He came in one day, mad as a chased hornet, and just took to beating us."

Enna blinked slowly. "Sileph did."

Razo nodded. "Oh, I'm all right. Alive. Just pulled my arm out of joint or something. He hit Finn harder, huh?"

Finn just gave a half smile and looked at his boots.

"Who was the third boy who came with you, the one killed?" she asked.

Razo and Finn glanced at each other.

"Don't know what you mean," said Razo. "We two came alone. Talone didn't even know."

"But wasn't there . . . Sileph said . . ." Enna stopped. It had been another lie, of course, told to make her a little more unsure, work on her to believe that Razo and Finn had been assassins. Enna squinted, seeing Finn turn a sickly yellow, then noticed that the yellowish shade was everywhere. The heat was suddenly awful, and she realized that she was enraged. She spoke slowly with forced calm, almost afraid that if she spoke with her real anger, her very words could scorch them.

"We're getting horses and riding north. I've got to finish this."

From outside, they could hear soldiers shouting. The fire blazed inside her; she resisted and immediately felt her body cringe and loosen. Her knees gave and she slumped. Finn was beside her, his arm supporting her.

"Easy, Enna, you all right?"

She nodded and the room wobbled. "It's worse, Finn. I started to let go out there, burning people and all. The fire wants to keep going; it wants all of me." She swallowed and felt her dry throat scrape against itself. "I've got to stop for a minute, so I can last until we find the army."

Finn set her carefully against the wall. "Sit easy. We'll take care of them."

"No worries, Enna-girl," said Razo, raising his sword with an eagerness that belied his tired, bruised body.

The door thrust open and five soldiers entered. Enna managed to burn a few swords out of hands before she concentrated on letting go of the heat, on breathing clear air. Behind the swirls of yellow and orange, she heard Finn and Razo fighting. She had no doubt they would win. They had to win now that she knew what she must do.

After a time, Finn's mild voice said, "We're ready, Enna."

She opened her eyes and nodded. "Let's go."

Hours later, they rode in the wake of the army. The frozen grass and wheat stubble was well trampled, the area scarred with the black pockmarks of fire pits. Sometimes, from far ahead, Enna could feel a tremendous heat. The cold night and the wind of riding fast had cooled her off. Now the rim of the sun was blazing over the horizon, and the promise of battle and the heat of hundreds of bodies began to taunt her. The hollowness in her chest throbbed like a wound.

"Let's skirt them if we can," she said.

Razo and Finn nodded. They had managed to scavenge some armor and two shields in Eylbold. Finn's helm made him look much older. Razo's was ill-fitting and tended to slip forward over his brow, and he reminded Enna of a small boy playing at dress-up. She cringed at the thought of his getting killed.

"On second thought, I'll go alone," she said. "You two go straight to the capital or Ostekin—whichever you think best—and warn."

Finn and Razo glanced at each other.

"Enna," Razo said gently, as though talking to an ill person or a child. She noticed he did not call her Enna-girl, and the abbreviation seemed to warn of something ending. "I think it's a bit late for caution. Scouts must've seen them by now, and the king's reinforcements'll come as soon as they can."

"Still, I think, just in case—"

"You aim to stop 'em," said Finn. "We're your guards, Enna. We're staying with you till the end."

"All right." Her voice squeaked as she spoke. Tired, cold, thirsty, she did not think she was capable of much emotion, but Finn's words pulled some out of her as easily as a showman tugs a scarf from his sleeve. The entire world seemed to be rushing down an icy slope, but she felt resolved. It was

the price of victory, and the price of her crimes. But the unsinged part of her wished differently for Razo and Finn.

"It's not over, Enna," said Finn. His expression was concerned, and something more, afraid maybe, though she knew he was not fearing the fight.

"I don't want it to be," said Enna. "I wish . . . "

She left her wish hanging and urged her mount forward.

They rode east of the trampled earth, close enough to Ostekin that they could have ridden there in an hour's time, but they did not spare it. Enna could feel the constant pressure of heat to her left, where the army marched just out of sight. She ached with it. Her chest arched and trembled, anxious for the fire. She found she could resist for now, though it cost her some pain.

Once they passed two scouts heading east. Razo tore after them when they began to flee, hollering that despite the Tiran garb it was he, Razo.

"Unbelievable," said one of the young scouts. "Razo, you are alive. Talone said no chance the Tiran could kill you."

Razo puffed up visibly. "Indeed. What's happening, Temo?"

"We haven't known much these weeks. They razed a lot of our scout network."

Enna swallowed, remembering the houses and wagons she had burned and the Bayern scout with an arrow in his chest.

"A couple of days ago," Temo continued, "the king sent a force to stop an invasion of Fedorthal. Then the queen came back from somewhere saying she'd heard on the wind of a greater army marching north."

"To the capital," said Finn.

"That's right. The king had time to pull his army back. They'll meet before the city by tomorrow, I shouldn't wonder. We're off with messages for reinforcements."

The other scout grimaced. "Looks bloody. Lots of Tiran."

They saluted and gave rein to their restless mounts, hurrying off to the east.

Enna, Razo, and Finn had to stop past midday to rest the horses by a partly frozen stream. The three lay down on the banks close together for warmth, Enna snug in the middle, and slept for a few hours. Near sundown they rode again and through the night, stopping once again for an hour's huddled rest. Finn lay against her back, his arm over hers. She tried to feel

hope at his touch, but instead of warming her, his heat reminded her that there was burning to do.

They rose and rode again. Only a couple of hours later, in the murky light of winter dawn, they heard battle.

Enna led them a little farther north and up a gentle slope. The noise became deafening. In the valley just a few hours' ride from the capital, two armies collided. This battle was two or three times the size of the battle of Ostekin where Leifer had died, and it seemed to Enna that the blue-clothed Tiran soldiers outnumbered the Bayern by at least three to one. She felt her mount shiver.

"What do we do?" said Razo.

Enna rode farther until they were a hundred paces to the side of the Tiran central force. Finn pulled out his sword and readied his shield. Razo followed. The sun crested the horizon behind them and touched their backs like a push from a warm hand. Despite the heat that hung about her like a poisonous vapor, Enna felt clammy and chilled. She knew she could not turn back now, but she trembled to begin.

"I miss you, Leifer," she said softly. Without further hesitation, she looked at the nearest grouping of Tiran soldiers, pulled in heat, and set them on fire.

At first she tried to go slowly, wait for the heat to gather again, not give up control too quickly, but the deeper she swam, the more desire she felt to just be pulled by the current. The fire begged, the lake of soldiers moved and shimmered, seemingly restless for their deaths. *Surrender*. So before the hollowness in her chest could turn cold and hard, before her skin numbed to the heat, she let go. It felt like dropping the reins on a wild mount, like pushing away from shore. She had been prepared for the horror, but she had not anticipated the joy.

Her horse began to prance and whine. She slipped from his back and onto her knees and continued to burn. It seemed a great while before men broke from their ranks to come after her. Perhaps Enna's Tiran dress and the boys' Tiran armor had fooled them for a time. Enna was conscious of the closer sounds of swordplay, but she did not move her eyes from the battlefield.

Then something new. Enna sent fire not into a man's hair or clothes, the dead parts of him, but right inside him, into his bones. She stopped for the first time, stumbled away, and emptied her stomach. She had not realized before that the living could also be fuel, and she felt betrayed by the fire, its

whispers justifying its existence because it burned only dead things. Lies. But to quit would be like stopping the water after swallowing. She turned back to the battle.

The burning field was mesmerizing. The heat from the sun, from the fires, the horses and living men, from Razo and Finn, it all met in her and became power. It was strange and beautiful how destruction and life were bound together in fire, and she marveled that she had never thought of it before. Her eyes stung, tears for the beauty of it scalded away before they could drop. Was that why she cried? For the beauty? And something else. Pain. She remembered that people cry for beauty and pain, and seeing both together was almost unbearable. She found she was on her stomach now, propped up by her shaking arms, straining her eyes at the field. She ripped apart her sleeves so that her bared arms could better feel the touch of heat.

Nearly a tenth of the field was on fire now, and the untouched pools of blue-coated Tiran seemed to be moving wrong, like a dammed stream. They were gushing out of the way of the fires. They were fleeing. *Burn them*, she thought, *before they're gone.* Again and again she filled up her chest with heat.

Then a noise like a twig underfoot. Something inside her cracked, and she felt the heat bleed into her, inside her chest, through her blood.

Now it's over, she thought, and she saw in her mind the hard, blackened body of Leifer crumpled on the battlefield. At last, here was burning pain without beauty, and it felt just. The world dimmed, the sounds of battle were muffled and far away. She felt herself fall forward, heard as from a distance her own cry. Everything seemed to be slipping away.

But before she was completely gone, a new sensation—wind. Cool, late-winter wind rolled over her skin, on her face, over her arms, into her lungs, touching her like a fall of water to wash away the grime. It was cool like a tree shade and carried with it the scents of snow, fox, pine, and hay. Wind reminded her of Isi, and Enna wondered if she were near. She thought she heard Finn say, "Hold on, Enna."

She breathed in as deep as her own roots, and when she breathed out again there was no pain, just sleep.

Part Four



Friend

Chapter 17

The sleep now was different from that of the king's-tongue days. Then the drug had smothered her in numbness and loss of will. Now, even unconscious, Enna found herself fighting. The struggle with the fire became a struggle to survive.

She idly thought that she was still lying on the rise over the battlefield because the sun was so very hot, burning her right through her clothing. It seemed to always be high noon. Sometimes she thought that she awoke, opened her eyes, and saw her body was a charred clump of hard ash. *Nightmare*. She recoiled into deeper, imageless sleep.

After a time, the struggle included a fight not just to live, but not to wake. In that faraway place where she could think, she feared that if she woke, she would die. She did not want to open her eyes and see the valley and the remnants of her burning. But awareness came closer and closer. She was cognizant of people touching her, speaking around her, placing a cup to her lips.

King's-tongue, she thought intuitively, and spat out the water. She creaked open an eye and saw that she lay in her old room in the palace. A physician stood over her, said something soothing, and brought the water back to her mouth. She drank.

She was conscious at first for only a scattering of moments. Sometimes she opened her eyes and saw that the room was dark and the windows full of night, and she admitted to herself that the heat came from inside her and not the sun after all. Often Isi was there, asleep on a sofa or reading by candlelight.

Slowly, painfully, Enna at last allowed herself to fully wake. The room was quiet. Only Isi was present, sitting in her chair with a book, twirling one short lock around a finger. Enna took a deep, shuddering breath.

Isi looked up.

"I'm still alive," said Enna, her voice raspy and without melody.

"Barely," said Isi. Her smile was friendly, but there were dark patches under her eyes.

Enna thought of the animal worker days in the city when Isi wore a hat all the time to hide her hair and identity and only Enna in all of Bayern knew that Isi was the foreign princess. She remembered Isi by Eylbold firelight, her hair chopped short, telling the Tiran guards the story of the prince and the dragon. She remembered Isi standing outside Ostekin, her hair long and loose, and her expression of horror—no, of sadness—when Enna unleashed a torrent of flaming heat.

Enna took another deep breath, wanting to say something, to explain. Her breath caught in her lungs, tightened, and turned into a sob. She covered her face and let the tears come, then cried out in pain when the sob shook a cracked place inside her chest. She remembered that injury on the battlefield, taking in more heat, feeling the hollow place get so hot, too hot, and snap. A flood of heat followed and even now continued to leak into her blood. She was changed. The fire was not gone—it would never leave. Neither would the images of that last battle, seemingly burned into the underside of her eyelids, always there when she closed her eyes.

Isi moved her chair closer and turned the wet cloth on Enna's forehead over to the cooler side. Enna held her breath until she could control the desire to cry, then spoke with a stunned, sleepy calm.

"I killed. Hundreds of people. I burned them alive."

"It was war," said Isi.

"It was me," Enna said bitterly. "You were right about the fire, about its power being too much for one person. But you should know, nothing forced me to do it. I chose to . . . to . . ." She lifted up her hands and saw the smooth, natural skin. "Why aren't I burnt up?"

"You nearly were. I heard rumor of you on the wind, and then I cooled you. The wind had to keep at you, like putting out a hay fire that keeps relighting."

"Ah," said Enna, remembering.

They were quiet a moment. Enna studied the way strips of light from behind the curtains painted the wall.

"It's over?" she asked at last.

"It's over," said Isi.

"And?"

"We won, more or less. Our land is ours again. It will be. There's still some . . . reconstruction needed."

Enna nodded. "Razo and Finn?"

“Razo’s going to live, but he took a sword in the ribs, on the hill beside you. He’s still in bed. I believe Finn’s fine. To tell the truth, I’ve been here with you for days and haven’t let anyone else in. I can go find him. He’s probably hovering somewhere nearby.”

“Don’t,” said Enna.

“All right.”

Enna thought of Finn sneaking into a Tiran camp ready to kill an army to get her free; of Finn bound, gagged, beaten by a jealous Sileph because of a look that passed between them; of Finn asleep beside her, his arm over hers. She had loved Sileph while he and Razo rotted, she had attacked Bayern, and she had slaughtered hundreds of people, and still Finn would forgive her. That knowledge felt like a needle pressed into her heart.

She watched Isi’s hand straighten a creased page of her book.

“I know now why Leifer died,” said Enna. “Part of it was just what happens when you use that much fire, but part of it was choice. He surrendered to it and burned big, but then knew he couldn’t live to see what he’d done, so he let himself burn out. It hurts, but not as much as seeing what you’ve made. I would’ve done the same as Leifer.” Her chin trembled and her face tightened to stop the tears.

Isi sighed and took Enna’s hand. “I want you to understand something, Enna, so listen to me. Are you listening? It’s what I was trying to tell you that night . . . before you left Ostekin the last time. I’ve talked with Razo about you and I’ve read a bit, and I think no one could’ve come out of this as well as you. Between Sileph’s power with words and the fire inside you aching for a reason to blaze, how could you resist? And yet you did for so long. Only Enna, stubborn, unyielding Enna. I know you’ve only done what you thought best.”

Enna nodded. She would love a reason to give up the guilt. But she remembered the nascent flame leaving her body and shooting into a soldier, and before it fully became fire and left her awareness, she felt it enter his flesh, enter the soft center of his bones, the speed of his blood, and there burst into fire. She shivered from deep inside.

When Enna did not speak for a time, Isi said, “You didn’t expect to live until now, did you?”

Enna shook her head.

“You still might not.” Isi leaned forward, meeting Enna’s eyes. “You’re on fire, En. You’ve been living inside a fever now for over two weeks. The

physicians don't know what to do. Is it just that you want to . . . burn out? Can you decide not to?"

Enna breathed in and winced at the tearing pain it made in her chest. "I don't know, Isi. I don't know how. It used to be that I had to find bits of heat and pull them to me, but near the end, the heat began to find me. It was like it recognized me, sought me out. It took all my concentration to keep it at bay. But on the battlefield, something in me . . . broke. I can't hold it back anymore. It's leaking inside me, all into me."

"Yes," Isi said thoughtfully.

"Is that how it is with you? Did the wind start to find you, stick to you, and you couldn't push it back?"

Isi looked about to respond, but they were interrupted by a physician bringing Enna food and a fresh cool cloth for her head. While he ministered to Enna, Isi stared at her book, though her eyes did not move across the lines. Enna slumbered, and when she woke again, she opened her eyes to a man standing over her. Instinctively she hunched deeper into the pillows.

Isi stood up. "Enna, it's Geric."

Enna's bleary eyes resolved the images before her, and she saw Geric standing by her bed, his brow furrowed.

"Should I go?" he asked.

"No, no," said Enna, trying to sit up. Isi put a hand on her shoulder that told her to relax. "You're fine, Geric."

"I think you must've had a rough time," he said, frowning.

She smiled weakly. "So've you, I guess."

"Geric," said Isi, "I was just coming to tell you. I think I know what Enna needs to heal. I'm taking her back to her house in the Forest. There's nothing more the physicians can do. I've asked a packhorse be prepared with food supplies for us, and Avlado and Enna's Merry are saddled and waiting."

Isi waited, smiling a little as though fearing his reaction.

"I'll go, too," he said.

Isi shook her head. "There's too much for you to do right now. The king can't leave. I'll be back as soon as she's better."

Geric pressed his lips together. "You're right, but I'm sending an escort at least."

Isi hesitated, then said, "Fine." She kissed his cheek, his lips, and then they embraced. At their affection, Enna felt her heart reach and long for

something. *Sileph*, came the unbidden thought.

"Oh," said Geric, squeezing her tighter, "I'll miss you, my yellow lady. Don't be long."

Isi pulled away and nodded. Her eyes were wet. It made Enna wonder how long Isi intended to be gone.

"Don't worry about me." Isi smiled and kissed him again.

Enna thought she was well enough to ride upright, and they left the city in the brightness of an early-spring morning, so unlike the last times she had ridden Merry over frozen midnight fields. She was happy to see the mare again and relieved she had made it home safely, but Enna could not enjoy the ride. A sensation like an empty walnut shell bounced in her chest. Heat clawed like rough fingernails on her skin.

Entering the Forest again was a skin-shuddering relief. The green buds and needles and creaking sounds were as familiar as the smell of her own bed, yet she felt like a stranger. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Everything seemed flammable, even her.

A day later, when they reached Enna's little house, Isi released the escort from their duty. "We're safe here. Tell the king we'll send word when we're ready to return, but not to bother checking for at least three weeks. I'm certain it will take longer than that."

"Three weeks is long, my queen," said the head guard.

"Two, then," said Isi. "Go on."

Enna frowned. The guards might be oblivious, but Enna could always tell when Isi was lying. Whatever Isi intended, it most likely would take much longer than two weeks.

Isi put Enna in her bed. The familiar smells of pinewood and chicken feathers reminded her so suddenly and profoundly of Leifer, she sat up coughing at the tightness in her chest. She breathed deeply and waved off Isi's concerned look.

Isi set up some split wood in the hearth. When she turned away to look for flint, Enna set it blazing.

Isi looked at her with creases around her eyes. "Should you . . . ?"

Enna shrugged. "The heat is constantly on me and inside me now. It can't hurt to expel a little."

"But not too much," said Isi.

Enna watched the tame little fire in the hearth, the pleasant ripples of orange and gold. The sound of heat-snapping wood was homey, like the

click of knitting needles. She felt like that fire—it seemed lively enough, but eventually the fire would burn through the logs and go out completely. She already felt worn down to embers.

"I brought you here with an idea," said Isi. "I've done more reading while you were sick. Yasid."

"That kingdom to the south," said Enna.

Isi nodded. "More than one book mentions a people there called the *tata-rook*, the fire worshippers. Some claim that the *tata-rook* have a relationship with fire. If it's common in Yasid, they must have a secret for using it and not letting it destroy them."

Enna watched the flames rise suddenly higher, and she thought how the hotter and brighter a fire burns, the faster it burns out. "We're going there."

"Yes," said Isi. "Soon. Tomorrow. Before Geric . . . before anyone knows we've gone. We can't go riding down there with an escort of fifty soldiers. There are roving bands of Tiran still, and with numbers we'd attract attention. If we want to avoid notice and have speed, our best chance is just the two of us alone. And if trouble finds us, I believe we can handle ourselves."

Enna pulled her gaze away from the fire. "That could take three months. Or four."

Isi nodded. "Or more."

"So, you'll sneak away, leave Geric, travel for months, just on the chance that the fire worshippers might have a cure?"

Isi blinked and said simply, "Yes."

"No," said Enna. She did not believe that getting rid of the heat, the fever, the desire, could be so simple. Even the thought of trying caused her legs to shake. "You don't even know if it will work, and I could die on the way, and you'd be alone and months away from home and you could get hurt—"

"Look at me, queen's maiden," said Isi. Enna stopped and looked. Isi was intent, even a little angry. "There's no debate here. You owe me. This is what I want—I want you to live. I order you to live. Do you understand?"

Enna nodded. Isi had never ordered her in anything. Her instinct was to fight back, but she found she did not want to this time.

They departed in the dewy morning. Isi had risen early to saddle the mounts and prepare the packhorse. She had managed to bring many bulging bags of

food from the palace and a small tent like the one Enna had slept in with Razo and Finn.

Enna's neighbor Doda stood in the yard to see them off. Isi had given her pleading instructions to put off the soldiers as best she could, and when the king came—for Isi was certain he would come—to tell him what she was doing and that they would be back before harvest.

The first few days they rode under the Forest canopy. The wet, green smells, the growing things, the ceaseless chatter of birds and squirrels, all seemed fresh and new. She had spent far too long in a small winter tent, and even longer subject to the impatient, ravenous desires of fire. She thought how it was the opposite of the slow life of the forest, lichen growing, moss, mushroom, one thing living off another. A tree did not have to die to support a nest.

Enna was battling constantly to restrain the heat and slow the fever's rise, and she had little energy for conversation. She soon realized that Isi was nearly as troubled as she. Enna watched her, imagining all Isi heard from the Forest breezes, and wondered if the voices of birds or the warm tones of her horse in her mind comforted her or added to the confusion.

At night they camped off the trails. Isi thought it best to avoid people in case they were recognized and word was sent back to the capital before they were out of Bayern. The winds helped direct her on paths where no people lived, and once they crossed the southern border of Bayern, she had a map sketch from the trader's book they could follow.

After one such day of long travel and silence, they set up camp inside a hollow made by the twining roots of two ancient firs. It was early spring, and the night air was a chill on their skin.

Isi was drinking a tea that smelled like steeped hay. She offered Enna a cup.

"It might help to resist the burning," said Isi.

"No," said Enna, "I'm done drinking teas and numbing control."

Isi nodded. "It helps me—a little. I don't dare take it during the day. I need to hear the wind to find our way. It's not so bad out here where we're alone. People are so much more complicated than trees and birds. But with it I sleep a little easier."

Enna shivered, despite the fire and the constant burn of her skin. She threw pieces of dead grass at the fire and got angry that they did not fly straight.

“Isi, I can’t pretend that we’re just great friends as always and go on. I tried to set you on fire, and I started burning against Bayern, and you’d be right to hate me.”

Isi looked at the flames a long while, and Enna found she was holding her breath. After a time, Isi looked up.

“It did hurt,” she said.

Enna shut her eyes against the ache.

“I didn’t hate you, Enna, but you know, it took me so long to trust people again after being betrayed before. Then I remembered that it was you who got me to trust again a couple of years back, and that was for a reason. And I remembered that Leifer had burned you, and you forgave him.”

“But why, Isi? Why do so much?”

Isi seemed stunned by the question. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. When I was completely alone, you were there. I know you must feel so alone right now, and the thought wounds me. But I care mostly because I’m selfish. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t deserve you,” said Enna.

“You’ve had a bad time of it, Enna. Be easier on yourself. I think about all you’ve been through . . . I had no idea what it must be like to have the world of fire nipping at you. I knew you were in deep with the fire, but I had no idea until I went into Eylbold that night that you were also in the clutches of a very dangerous man. I have a feeling it’s extraordinary that you did resist him as much as you did. After a month alone with a man like that, so skilled in people-speaking, I imagine nearly any other person would’ve licked his boots at command.”

Thinking of Sileph still made Enna feel odd, put together wrong, like a loosely stitched doll. She shifted uncomfortably.

“That was a brave thing you did, coming to Eylbold,” said Enna. “I was . . . You made me better with your words.”

“I would’ve been a poor friend not to attempt it. As I recall, a few years ago you stormed through a raging battle just to get by my side so I wouldn’t feel alone.”

“Did I?” Enna raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Yes, well, that wasn’t half-bad, was it?”

“No, not half. That next day after the fighting was the best day of my life.”

Enna grinned. “I remember you about smacked me when I suggested we call the newly formed Forest band the yellow band after you.”

Isi rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes.” She started to giggle. “And you remember when Razo got his javelin from the king, how his hands shook so hard he could hardly hold it?”

Enna laughed, too. “He had fish eyes; he didn’t dare blink in case it’d all go away.”

They laughed much harder than the memory was funny because it felt good to laugh. At first the shaking hurt Enna, and she felt that place in her chest shift uneasily like shards of broken bone scraping one another. But then something found its right place, the pain eased, and the laughter felt more natural.

That night for the first time since the battle, Enna did not worry when she went to sleep that she would not wake up again. The next day the travel was a little easier to bear. On rainy evenings, they set up the tent early and huddled together under its thin eave. Enna found her voice to tell the story she could not before. What Leifer’s death was like, how she felt as though someone had grabbed her insides and ripped her like paper. And why she had read the vellum, how the knowledge had felt more important and beautiful than anything in all the warring world.

She told Isi about Finn and his whispered confession in the tent at night. And she whispered Sileph’s name at last, though it hurt her to admit that she had fallen for his words and lies and looks. She could barely confess that her heart still felt twisted and pained even at the thought of him.

And Isi always listened, never told Enna she had been foolish, never said hollow things like “You’ll be all right.” Enna knew that Isi had seen her own father killed, had lost her family, her homeland, her beloved horse Falada, and still, even in her joy with Geric, she carried an edge of that sadness. Isi saw Enna’s struggle and her sadness, and she understood.

Then one evening the talk stilled, and drowsily, they found themselves playing with wind and fire. Enna set a pile of dead pine needles crackling, and Isi flung a suffocating wind to blow out the fire. Enna pushed out more heat and anticipated Isi’s lighter wind that blazed the fire higher. Enna added heat, Isi added breath, and the fire grew. Each seemed to sense what the other would do in advance, and they worked together like an old couple long accustomed to shared chores. Then, when Isi pulled in a stronger wind, the kind that would take the air away from the fire and kill it, Enna stopped

her short. She sent a rush of heat against the swoop of air, and the heat changed the air, split the wind into pieces, hot, erratic gusts that blew themselves away.

"A neat trick," said Isi.

Enna smiled. "It makes me wonder what else we could do."

* * *

The next day they crossed Bayern's border. In Bayern, they had often passed within sight of farmhouses and close enough to Bayern hundred-bands on border patrol that Isi could sense them on the wind. But now they passed through unclaimed land. The grass was coarser, the ground stony, and there were few settlements. Even so, the risk of running into roaming bands of their recently defeated enemies was a dangerous possibility. Whenever Enna found herself wondering of Sileph, she quickly pushed his voice and face out of her mind. Isi looked back over her shoulder more and more. Twice Isi said she thought a man on horseback followed, someone familiar to her she could not name.

Some days past the border, Enna and Isi were filling their bottles at a stream. Isi stood up suddenly and turned, looking like a woodpecker listening at a trunk.

"What is it?" said Enna.

"Men." Isi opened her hands, listening to the wind curl through her fingers. "Not the single horseman—two different men. They're near. The wind was going north, so I didn't realize until now—"

A man's voice interrupted her. "There, now, look at that."

Enna saw two men ride up, both with at least a month of beard growth and sporting somewhat tattered Tiran uniforms. One seemed familiar, perhaps a guard she had seen on one of her raids or even in the Eylbold camp.

"Well, they are not rabbits, but they will do just fine. Three horses, some supplies, and two little girls to add to the treasure." He smiled at Enna and winked. "Hello there, pretty girl."

"Go away." Enna meant to sound commanding, but it came out sounding a bit bored. The tall man laughed. Isi took Merry and the packhorse and hooked their reins onto the strong arms of a shrub. It was then that Enna realized they would not avoid this without a fight.

"Well, well, Pilad, looks like we found ourselves a Bayern girl. One of them is, anyway," said the tall, more talkative soldier.

The one called Pilad did not seem capable of smiling. He leered at Enna, and his hands fumbled at his sword hilt anxiously. “Yes, that is fine. You there, girls, come on with us, now. It’s up to you if we catch you easy or hard.”

Isi stepped up beside Enna. They looked at each other and smiled a little.

“We’re not running, pig-boys, as you can see,” said Enna, the tiredness in her voice edged with laughter, “but I think you’d best run yourselves if you want your skulls to keep a good hold on your hair.”

The tall man looked at her, stunned, then turned to his companion and guffawed. The other laughed, too, but without smiling. Enna and Isi exchanged glances again. Isi smirked.

“I don’t understand,” said Pilad. “Why do they look all giggly? Do they have warriors hidden in the brush somewhere?”

The other drew his sword. “Let’s take them before their companions return.”

He started to ride forward. Isi took Enna’s hand, and Enna knew exactly what to do. She sent a spark into the brambling ground before the advancing rider. Even before it flamed, Isi seemed to know where Enna would send the spark, and she fanned it with the wind. The rider’s steed reared, neighing in fear. Prodded by the wind, the fire rushed and crackled until it completely encircled both riders. Enna replenished the circle with more fire where she felt the wind leave gaps. She did not worry about Merry. With the same certainty that she knew where Isi would send her wind, she knew Isi, through Avlado, would calm their horses.

The flames of the circle leaped over one another, clawing the air higher and higher. The men dropped their swords and tried to soothe their anxious mounts. Enna smiled at them. The fire wanted the men, their clothes, their hair, their bones and blood. It wanted to push past the wind that maintained it like a flock of sheep. But it was easier to keep control with Isi beside her in silent communion. An understanding flowed between them purer than anything she had known. Enna felt right next to Isi; the fire felt right with the wind.

At the same moment, they both knew the riders had had enough. Enna sucked the heat from the flames, and Isi’s wind blew it up into the cold sky. The soldiers gaped, one seeming close to tears. Their horses stamped unhappily.

Enna glared. “I said, run.”

Without hesitation, they turned their mounts and galloped north.

Isi laughed. “Well, I know I shouldn’t, but I loved that. You are amazing.”

“No, you are.” Enna laughed from her belly and felt like crowing. The warmth from the fire, the victory, the heat around her ready for a new lighting. The laugh shook her chest. She coughed and bent over, vomiting her breakfast, seeing again the battlefield and men on fire. The memory was so real—vibrant, twisting flames, smells of smoke and burnt hair, the rolling nausea she felt at setting the inside of a man aflame. Slowly she became mindful of Isi standing behind her, rubbing her back.

“I’m sorry.” Enna wiped her mouth and straightened. She slowly met Isi’s eyes. “I’m so afraid, Isi, of what we’ll find in Yasid, of losing this. But I don’t want to kill again.”

Isi nodded. They mounted the horses and turned south.

Two more weeks of travel did little to improve Enna’s fever. She and Isi found themselves unable to converse during the day, both concentrating on staying upright and trying to keep the heat or voice of the wind at bay.

Isi worsened with each day in the open, and the tea worked less and less well. And besides the wind illness, Enna began to sense something else amiss in Isi. The heat from her increased. It was as though Isi had a fire burning in her middle. When Enna asked her, Isi just smiled and said, “I think I’m all right.”

One night, like many others, Enna woke in the dark burning from fever. She moaned and rubbed her face, and the heat of her forehead scalded her fingertips. When the fever was this severe, she needed Isi to send a breeze to cool her off, break apart the heat that clung to her skin, and breathe in the cleansing air.

“Isi,” Enna whispered.

There was a wash of orange over the dark night. When she closed her eyes, the orange pulsed and spun. The fever dimmed her other senses until only touch felt real—almost too real, sensitive and painful. Her clothes and the blanket seemed as grating as raw stone against her skin. She thought she heard noises outside, though it sounded as though her head were underwater. Sometimes in the night, Enna found Isi curled up on the ground beside Avlado or wandering around the camp, rubbing under her eyes where the dark circles never left.

Enna stumbled out of the tent and called Isi's name again. It was only then she understood that not all the heat she was feeling came from inside her. More choked the air of their camp than the horses and campfire could account for.

She could not see well for the orange fog and dim moonlight, but she spotted shapes gathered around their campsite. On the ground a few paces away from her, she thought she saw the lighter tones of what might be Isi's hair. From that direction a wind blew, brushing away the seeping heat, clearing her vision and hearing. What she saw then made her gasp and choke on the breeze.

Isi was kneeling on the ground. Behind her, a man in tattered Tiran blue held her shoulders and a naked dagger against her throat. Around the campsite stood more men, perhaps twenty, some on horseback, some dismounted. About seven held strung bows, arrows aiming at Enna. Two of the soldiers on foot she recognized as the men she had taunted and told to run. They looked nervous. No one else did.

Fools, she thought. *Why risk their lives for three horses and meager supplies?*

In a moment she could see that she could burn all the bows at once, but not without risk that the arrows would fire anyway and might still find her flesh. She could not burn the man at Isi's back without hurting Isi, but at least she could scald the dagger from his hand. And there would be wind, too, she remembered, and hoped it could take care of all the flying arrows. She had to be clever to avoid burning any more people. Visions of a smoldering battlefield swooped before her and made her shiver as though she could feel hot ash raining on her skin.

Still calculating and eyeing Isi for a clue, she said with some impatience, "Well, what do you want?"

"Just you, Enna."

Sileph stepped from behind the line of horses and into the firelight, standing close enough to Enna to reach her in two strides.

"I came back for you," he said.

Chapter 18

His uniform was fraying at the cuffs, and his boots were covered in an inch of dried mud, but his hair was clean and combed and his face smooth shaven, as though he had prepared for their meeting. Standing before his men, she was struck again by how handsome he was and the palpable power of his presence, so unlike that of anyone she had known.

And this incredible man had searched for her, had wanted no one else. His look said that he still needed her, that he would forgive her, that his home would be her home. Her skin ached. Her neck remembered his touch.

"Enna, Enna." A sigh came up from his depths, full of sadness and struggle, and relief. "Enna, at last."

"You've been looking for me?" Her voice squeaked a little higher than normal.

"Yes," he said. "I have been running, mostly, and hoping. I said I would come back for you."

"Enna," said Isi, her voice full of warning.

Enna remembered then that Isi had a dagger against her throat and seven arrows were aimed at her own heart, but she looked back at Sileph, not quite ready to let him go.

"You, you're alive," she said lamely. "I wondered."

"Did you?" He raised his eyebrows. "Thinking of me, were you? Well, many of us did not make it through that one. I do not blame you, Enna, truly. War is brutal. I am just relieved that it is over. No matter now who won. But what has plagued me these past weeks is that you might not know, no matter the outcome, that I still wanted you."

He stepped forward, and she tensed as he put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her in. His smell engulfed her and she felt her knees wobble, but she placed her hands on his chest and pushed him back. He stepped away, though his eyes looked sad.

"Sileph," she said, trying to get an edge back in her voice. "I'm Bayern, and, and whatever you've in mind for us now, it won't work. I burned your army."

“Ah, well, the wisdom goes that what is fair in love is fair in war. We might be even now.” He smiled at her. “You do not look battle scarred. You look wonderful.”

She blushed and realized she was blushing because her clothes were dirty and her hair was surely a sight. The ridiculousness of that worry stuck in her mind, and as he continued to talk, flattering her looks, her bravery, her power, she found herself unable to be caught up again in the sound of his voice and the longing gaze in his eyes. For a moment she mourned the loss of his enchantment; then she thought about herself mourning it, and it occurred to her that it was all quite funny. So she laughed. Sileph paused midsentence and frowned.

“This is absurd!” She glanced around again, trying to ground herself in the reality of danger and not lose herself to Sileph. There was Isi. With a prickling of her skin, she realized that Isi was not just Isi—she was the queen. They did not know they had the queen of Bayern at their feet. But if they found out? She had to end this now.

“Absurd. What fools are we all. You, there,” she said, pointing at one of the archers, “you’re a fool, too. Put down the arrows, boys. Enna-girl doesn’t want to have to burn you.” She spoke with light-heartedness, but her pulse pounded in her throat. *Please, please,* she thought, *please put them down.* They did not move.

“Enna.” Sileph’s gaze locked hers. His arms reached out for her but dropped when she laughed again.

“You’re a pickled plum, aren’t you, Captain? I’ll bet your nursemaid fell in love with you as soon as you could talk. I’ll bet your da beat you out of jealousy over your ma. I’ll bet this little persuasion gift of yours hasn’t all been a festival, has it? But it worked on me, I’ll admit. I’d’ve followed you to Ingridan and borne your children and bade my heart beat only in time with yours. But now I just feel sorry for you, Sileph, and I don’t want to burn you, so please go away. Now.”

Sileph smiled his marvelous smile. “I love when you resist.”

“Don’t,” said Enna, her voice snapping with anger. “Don’t try to seduce me with all that ‘you’re so powerful and so am I’ nonsense. I’ve had enough, Sileph. Go away.”

Sileph looked at her, and his expression changed from loving to confused to enraged. He shouted once and walked a tight, quick circle as though looking for something to hit. Then he turned suddenly back to her and

pointed, his arm extended. “Do not think you can toss me aside, Enna. I have worked too hard to just let you go. You were going to be my answer, and instead, I lost everything.”

He dropped his arms and for a moment looked tragic. “Tiedan blamed me for the loss, saying you only used to burn a tent or two, and you never would have broken your fire loose over our army if I had not held you captive for so long.”

“Well, what do you know, at last Tiedan and I find common ground—we both blame you.”

Sileph raggedly combed his hair with his hand and cast a nervous glance at the men behind him. He smiled and laughed a little. “I just have not explained, then. I want you to be with me. I promised you a house of white stone, three stories up overlooking a river. It was to be you and me, Enna. If it is not, then I just do not know which of us will live through this.”

Enna felt a shift of heat. Someone was moving. In her periphery she saw Avlado, who was never picketed at night, standing much closer to Isi than he had before. Isi closed her eyes as though deep in thought.

“Hmm, let’s see, who’ll live?” Enna spoke louder and paced a little, hoping to keep their attention. “Your options don’t look good tonight, Captain. This just might be a gamble you’re destined to lose.”

In that moment, Avlado reached over the shoulder of the man holding Isi and sank his great, yellow teeth into the man’s hand. The man screamed and dropped the knife. Isi dropped to the ground and rolled away from his grasp as Avlado turned and planted his rear hooves in the soldier’s back.

Then there was wind. Enna did not feel as strong a connection with Isi as she had when holding her hand, but even now she could guess what Isi would do, and their wind and fire worked together. Enna targeted the wood of the bows and arrows first, and those arrows that snapped loose flew wild in the gust of wind. One planted itself in the thigh of a soldier. With the flashes of fire, the horses reared and screamed. The soldiers dropped scorched bows and tried to calm their mounts. Others drew swords, which they quickly dropped with shouts of pain. To Enna’s relief, she saw that Isi had mounted Avlado. If Enna could not handle these men, if she could not escape without burning them, she hoped Isi would ride straight and safe back to Geric.

Some of the men started to advance on her, swords or no, when Sileph held up his arm. They halted.

“You will not harm her,” he shouted. “She is mine.”

He met eyes with Enna. He looked fevered, his eyes wet, his face red. He was sweating, and the muscles of his jaw were tight and bulging.

“Do not do this,” he said slowly. “Do not make me kill. You know we are for each other. I made you what you are, and you will make me what I am to be. They were necessary lies. Do not let such trifles make you disbelieve that I loved you, Enna.”

At his words, Enna felt her heart rip and rage with her blood. He stood before her looking as he ever had, but what she had seen when she loved him had faded, and in its place she glimpsed a desperate, proud, ruthless man. The cracked place in her chest cramped and throbbed, and she felt heat push hard through her entire body. She forced her voice to scrape out of her throat.

“Did you love me most when I was drugged and helpless, Sileph? Did you love me when I was so baffled by the king’s-tongue that I actually thought you were a man? You loved a shell, then.” Heat seeped out of her, and she let it jump into fire at her sides and back, tearing into the brush around her, the flames clawing at the air. “This’s what I am, Sileph. This’s what I am! You’d best run or I’ll cook you. I’ll do it. Run.”

“You want me to burn? Then let’s do it together.”

Sileph leaped forward and pushed Enna to the ground. Before she hit the flames behind her, a quick, hard wind blew through them, sucking the air away and dismissing the flames into ash. Sileph landed on top of her, his hands scrambling for her neck. *Burn him,* came the thought, but he was too close, and she could not bear to do it. Wind battled his head and threw dirt into his eyes. He knelt up, wiping at them. Avlado’s hooves knocked him in the chest. When he fell, Enna regained her feet and stumbled back.

Burn him now, came the thought. She hesitated. He stood and made to pounce again.

From behind Enna, from the dark fields to the north, a voice called. Sileph wavered, and Enna turned.

Finn rushed into the camp, straight at Sileph, and knocked him to the ground. He sat on his chest and punched him in the head twice before Sileph caught his breath and kicked Finn off him, sending him sprawling across the ground. When both men gained their feet, they drew their swords. They exchanged one or two blocks and thrusts, but before Finn or Sileph drove a sword home, before heat blistered Sileph’s sword from his

hand or burned the clothes from his body, before wind knocked him off his feet, something happened that Enna least expected.

A dagger flew into Sileph's back. He looked up, his mouth open silently. Two more daggers pierced his uniform, and he jerked, then fell, quite dead.

They all stood in silence a moment, looking at the body. Enna stared at the back of his head, breathless, feeling stunned and horrified and relieved at once. A soldier dismounted and took several steps toward the body, his hands up in the air to show he held no weapon. Enna recognized Pol, Sileph's lieutenant.

"Well, that is that," said Pol. Then, gesturing to the body and looking at Enna, he said, "May I?"

She nodded. He took the first dagger from Sileph's back, wiped it off on the dead man's uniform, and slipped it back into his own belt. He drew out the other two.

"I assume from the presence of these two daggers that I was not alone in wishing him gone?" he said.

A few of the soldiers laughed uncomfortably. All glanced around as if trying to figure out who might have been loyal to Sileph and if they would now start a fight in his defense. No one did. Many of the soldiers put away their cooled swords and looked nervously at Enna. Pol cleaned off the remaining daggers as if unaware of the tension.

"We should have done that weeks ago," said a low-voiced soldier, receiving his dagger back from Pol.

"Maybe they will let us back into Ingridan with the captain dead," said another.

"Let us see," said Pol.

They slung Sileph's body over the back of his horse and mounted. Pol bowed stiffly at Enna and said, "I hope we never meet again." They rode northeast.

Finn had not moved. He stood breathing heavily and looked weathered and tired, but he held his shoulders square and seemed ready to fight again if need arose.

"Hello," he said. He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve. His eyes did not flick away from hers. He did not try to woo her, to flaunt his greatness, so opposite of all Sileph had been. He was just Finn, just happy to be with her again. That was, to Enna, an astonishing relief.

“Hello, Finn.” She smiled and laughed a little because she felt herself starting to cry.

He walked to her, and quite unexpectedly, Enna felt shy. *This is Finn*, she thought. *If this moment happens, we can’t ever undo it.* Then she realized, after all that had passed, that the moment had already happened, and she had been too dim to see.

He reached her and put his arms around her, fitting his face into her neck. She pressed the side of her face against his and let herself cry.

“Enna,” he said, holding her tighter. Inside Finn’s arms, Enna did not feel like the helpless girl shut up in an enemy tent, or the angry, blazing girl who had confronted Sileph. Now she felt she was herself again, just Enna, just who she wanted to be. His touch told her so.

He kissed her cheeks and her hair, his eyes shining as though he could scarcely believe it.

She put her hands on his cheeks to see his face, her thumb covering the scar he had received at Sileph’s hand.

“You’re so good, Finn. So good.”

“I can be better,” he said. “You’ll see, Enna.”

After a few minutes Isi returned, though Enna had not noticed that she had left, bringing Finn’s horse in tow. She kept her eyes on the ground until Enna said, “Oh, it’s all right, Isi.”

Isi looked up and smiled. “Good evening, Finn. How’s your mother?”

Chapter 19

The going was slow and painful. Enna never felt fully recovered from the struggles with Sileph, and the fever stormed inside her. Sometimes from halfway within a dream, she heard Finn's desperate voice—"Isi, please, she's so hot, you've got to wake up"—and then Enna would feel a breeze help push back the orange haze.

Once she dreamed of Sileph and saw again the moment when fire raged around her and she yelled that he loved a shell. She started awake, breathless, afraid that she was dead. Even in sleep, she was aware of the fever tugging life from her, but awake, she was conscious of Yasid looming on the horizon like a dangerous storm cloud. The fever, and the death it promised in its steamy breath, frightened her as much as the thought that she would live to reach Yasid and be cured. With fire blazing around her, she had said to Sileph, "This is what I am." Without the fire, what would she be?

But relief was palpable when Finn was near. With Enna lost in a fever haze and Isi tormented by wind, Finn became their caretaker. He cooked for them and scouted their path through bogs and stony hills, following as best he could Isi's old map. When Enna was especially sick, he tried to get her talking to take her mind away or asked Isi to tell stories. Or, at the worst moments, he took her in his arms and sang in his dry, low voice silly songs about swimming rabbits and no-tailed squirrels.

Their journey was further slowed by the river Suneast that had obviously swollen since the map had been drawn, and they spent three days looking for a crossing. After the Suneast, they followed a road beside a stream, occasionally meeting travelers with hair nearly as dark as the Bayern and skin the color of polished cherrywood. Finn caught fish and hare and traded some of his meat catches for dark, flat bread.

The other travelers did not speak their northern language. To no surprise to Enna, as often as Isi was well enough to stand and walk she was practicing on the southerners the language of Yasid outlined in her book.

“It takes some listening to figure out how they speak and get the accent down, but I think I’ve about made it out.”

“You would,” said Enna. “You’re amazing. Here’s the extent of my gift of languages: Over there!”

“Over there,” Finn shouted without looking up as he cleaned the cookpot.

They laughed, then had to explain the story to Isi, and Enna quickly found in the telling that it was not so funny to her anymore. She stopped speaking and looked away, shunning the various burning images awash in her mind. She had that haunting feeling again that if she just looked over her shoulder, she would see remnants of her handiwork—smoking tunics, blistering faces, mouths open to scream.

“Enna,” said Finn.

Enna knew that, though terrible, the memories could not haunt her so fiercely if she did not still harbor the longing to burn. The thought of losing her intimacy with fire hurt almost as much as how it now burned her blood and skin.

Then at last, over two months from leaving the palace, they passed the border of Yasid and into Quapah, the first town. What first appeared to be a stone city wall proved to be built from bricks the color of the sand. The houses and buildings were smooth structures with small, high windows. Everything was pale and brilliant, flashing back at the sunlight and burning the eyes.

Isi asked a woman where to find the *tata-rook,* the fire worshippers. She wrinkled her nose as though she smelled something rotten and pointed beyond the city wall and grazing goats.

They led their horses across the scrubby grasses of the goat pastures, over a rocky ledge, and onto smooth, fine dirt again. Just at the sight of a rambling building, Enna felt her stomach squeeze tighter in dread. It was tidy and well laid. A stacked rock wall surrounded fields of green plants, vegetable fronds sticking their heads up through the pale soil, and rows of corn, cotton plants, and fruit trees with lustrous green leaves. This land was so much warmer and drier, and so much more open to the strikes of sunlight than the forest she knew, Enna marveled that anything grew at all.

Atop a platform in the center of the field, a young man sat cross-legged, his hands on his knees, his eyes closed. A cloth was stretched over his head, shading him from the sun. Enna squinted into the distance and thought she saw similar platforms in the fields on the far side of the house. Enna greeted

the man, and Isi asked him a question in the southern tongue, but he did not look their way.

The three scrambled along the rock wall, looking for an opening for their horses to pass. From behind they heard voices. Isi stopped to listen.

Four boys came from the direction of the town. They climbed atop the wall some thirty paces from the travelers. Their hands were full of stones, and they shouted at the man perched on the platform. To Enna, the words sounded harsh and ugly.

"They're saying some words I don't know," said Isi, "but they feel like insults. And they're calling the man 'unbeliever' and asking him why he's so selfish with the rain, only making it fall on their fields."

They heard a loud snap. One of the boys had thrown a rock at the platform. It bounced off a pole.

"Why would they do that?" said Enna. "And why does he let them?"

Isi shouted something at them, but the boys paid her no mind.

Another snap.

"For pity's sake," said Enna.

Finn's hand darted to the sword at his hip. Enna thought, *Good for you.* But Isi put a hand on Finn's arm.

"I don't think even defensive swordplay would be wise in a place where we are the outsiders."

Another stone. This one hit the man on the side of his arm. He flinched but did not open his eyes. The town boys laughed and gathered more rocks.

"Come on, then," said Enna, taking Isi's arm, though she scarcely felt capable of taking another step. "If no one else will stop boys from attacking a defenseless person, we have to." Finn walked beside Enna, his face adopting his wary warrior expression. She faced the boys and raised her voice. "Ho there."

The boys turned to them with amused smiles. Two stones launched in their direction. Finn and Enna remained still, knowing that Isi would deal with it, and indeed, a sudden breeze easily knocked them off their path. One of the boys jabbered something at Enna and threw another stone, this one also missing its mark.

"Just threats," said Isi.

"Tell them the *tata-rook* don't want to hurt them, but that the sun's their father and he'll protect them," said Enna.

Isi translated, pointing up at the sun, and the boys smirked and laughed. Enna took Isi's hand and a felt a little more strength steady her bones. She could sense the heat streaming from their bodies and began to tug, like winding loose yarn into a ball. The action was as satisfying as pulling a barbed thorn from her foot.

"Tell them the sun loves the *tata-rook*, and they must be careful, for when the boys threaten them, the sun takes away its heat."

Isi translated. Enna continued to pull. The loose heat caught, and she yanked harder, pulling living heat from their bodies. It was drawn to her, into her. Without her having to ask, Isi knew to send a wind over her skin, into her mouth.

The boys were no longer laughing. Their confused faces began to show fear, and she saw color fade from their cheeks. One of them lifted his hands to the sun and shouted with a trembling voice.

"He's begging the sun to forgive and let them live."

There's more in there, thought Enna. *If I keep going, I can pull out just a little more.*

Finn touched her shoulder. "That's probably good. Just that."

The wind blew harder. Enna let go of the strings to their life heat and stumbled. Finn caught her under her arms and held her up. The boys relaxed, put arms around themselves, and shivered. After a moment they all raised gestures of thanks to the sun, hopped off the wall, and ran back to the village.

The three turned toward the house and only then noticed a man standing not two paces away. He had dark skin wrinkled with sun and a beard graying around his mouth. For a moment a smile seemed to twitch on his lips, but he stilled it and just stood looking over their faces. As she stood there in the open, the earth felt hotter to Enna than her own skin. She could still feel the sensation of tugging on those boys' life heat. To gather it and let it seep and blow away without lighting fire made her hands twitch as if for a task to perform. She bit her lip and looked at Finn for comfort, but his face swooped in and out of her vision.

At last the man spoke a word. Isi responded in the southern tongue and then translated his response.

"He says that we may've saved that man's life, but it's too dangerous to play with such a force."

Isi and the man continued to speak as he led them closer to the house. A woman appeared and silently led their horses away. The man motioned for them to sit on the cool tiles of a porch. When Enna passed into the shade and yet still seemed to feel the relentless beating of the sun, she knew she was in a bad way.

"Enna," said Isi.

Enna slowly met her look and realized belatedly that Isi had said her name several times before she responded.

"Enna, this man is Fahil. He is the caretaker of this *roga tata-rook*, this community of fire worshippers."

"Fahil," said Enna.

Fahil thrust his hand against her forehead and pulled it away quickly, then nodded and said something to Isi.

"I'm learning so much, Enna." Isi's voice heightened in excitement, and she spoke the northern tongue to Finn and Enna, occasionally translating further communication from Fahil.

"He says, it's no ugly thing to be a fire worshipper. The sun is the manifestation of the Creator, and fire is the manifestation of the sun. But it is not an easy blessing. That's why they're all here."

"Here in this, uh, *roga tata-rook*? They're all like me?" said Enna.

Isi nodded, looking at Fahil and straining to understand. "He says, some people of the desert lands are born intimate with fire, that when they first show signs of it they come here, or to other *roga tata-rook*." She spoke to the man and got his answer. "Yes, he says he too can pull fire from air, but he won't do it, um, casually. It's not for humans to play like creators. The townspeople, they don't understand, or they fear them. Those boys we stopped were from Quapah. Fahil says they bother the *tata-rook* sometimes, and once townspeople killed a woman as she sat in the field."

Isi spoke for a moment, then translated Fahil's response. "He is surprised that both you and your brother were taught the skill. He has never known it to be taught, just born in a person after a certain age, and he's never heard of a northerner with the knowledge."

"Why me, then?" asked Enna.

Isi shrugged. "He doesn't know. Maybe you and Leifer had a relative from the south far back, or maybe it can be taught after all and no one ever tried."

“But Isi,” said Enna, “Fahil and the others we’ve seen, they’re fine. But there’s something wrong with me.”

Isi repeated Enna’s words, and Fahil looked back at the sky, a crease between his eyes. Then he spoke softly.

Isi hesitated. “He agrees that you are dying.”

Finn made a small noise. Enna rubbed at fever chills on her arm. She had wondered for weeks if dying felt like that, the fever burning constant hopelessness. She had thought it was just fear of losing the fire and living in a world void of heat, but it was not just fire she might lose.

Enna felt Fahil watching her. Isi spoke again with much halting, and Fahil seemed reluctant to answer. After a time he pointed to the man on the nearest platform.

“I begged him to tell me how all the *tata-rook* avoid the burning inside that came to you with the fire knowledge,” said Isi. “He asks me, do I know why that man sits up there? He’s talking to the, uh, water, or the rain and dew. They have a word that means any water that doesn’t come out of a well. He can’t call the water from the clouds, but what water there is in the air, he can ask it to go to the plants instead of wasted on the sand. Here they grow enough food for everyone in the *roga tata-rook* and much of Quapah. That’s how they can produce so much in a desert.” Isi turned to Enna, her eyes full of excitement. “They have water-speaking. Isn’t that amazing? I’ve always wondered.”

Isi spoke again and listened to Fahil’s response. “He says, everyone who comes to a *roga* with fire knowledge is taken in to see if they also know water. It takes years to develop. And in some it never does. . . . He won’t say directly, but I think the ones who never develop the water tongue, they go away, or they die. But when a person knows both heat and water, they form a balance. The language of fire doesn’t overwhelm them, tempered by the presence of the water, and the water can’t consume the person because of the threat of the heat always near. It makes sense, Enna. I often thought that the wind was overcoming me because I didn’t speak all languages, as the tales say we once did. But I never thought that balance could come from just knowing two elements that work against each other. I’m going to ask him if he’ll teach you rain.” She grinned and shook Enna’s knee.

Enna wanted to respond, but speaking took too much energy. Everything was slowing down. Fahil spoke, his lips barely moving. His words sounded so strange to her, not like a human tongue at all, more akin to the creaking

and moaning of old trees, and she wondered if she was hearing right. He paused and looked up. Enna followed his glance to the blazing sky and felt as though she were falling into the scorching blueness. She tried to grab Finn and stay attached to the earth, but blue changed to black.

Chapter 20

Enna awoke off and on in a low bed. Often Isi was asleep in another cot, whether the small, high window spoke of night or day. Finn sat on the floor beside her whenever she opened her eyes, and he would proffer corn cakes and sweet water. When she was awake enough to listen, he explained how she had passed out and Isi had gone to bed soon after. Both had been resting for two days. Enna, her voice squeaking, said, "That's all well and good, but as for resting, I don't think I'm quite done."

Another night and day blurred past, and eventually, both Enna and Isi found themselves awake at the same time.

"Sleep well?" said Enna.

Isi laughed.

All that day Enna stayed in bed, listening to the unintelligible conversations between Isi and Fahil that echoed in from the porch. Finn stayed by her side, but she had little energy to speak. Or will. Fahil came in to look at her, feel her face, then left again, frowning. The closer night approached, the more fear seized her. From the sounds of the conversation, something had been decided.

At full night, Isi returned. For a long, aching moment, she did not speak.

"What about learning the rain, and balance and everything?" asked Enna.

"Fahil says rain has never been taught," said Isi. "And it takes years for the *tata-rook* to develop it naturally."

"Oh," said Enna. She could not imagine living in the *roga* for years. "Do you want to leave me here, Isi? Finn can go back with you to Bayern, and I can stay, and try. . . . "

Isi exhaled softly. "Fahil doesn't think you have the time to try . . . and I think he's right."

"Oh, well," said Enna, "that was a lot to hope for, anyway, wasn't it?" She tried to laugh, but it caught in her chest and sent a rip of pain down her spine. A fever chill shook her visibly. Finn wrapped his arms around her.

"Can you walk?" asked Isi. "Fahil says . . . he says you're close to slipping away. He says if you sleep again, you might not wake. There are

tales among his people that fire knowledge can be erased from a person who is consumed by it without ever learning the rain. It's . . . tricky, I gather, and it's never been attempted in his life, but we think we should do whatever we can now, tonight. They have a sacred place atop the hill, and he thought it would be a good place to try."

Finn put Enna's arm around his neck and helped her walk away from the building and up the rising hill. Enna felt weary everywhere. She was tired of feeling half-dead all the time, tired of illness making her powerless. But to lose the fire . . . If she survived, she feared the rest of her life would feel like those early weeks in Eylbold, imprisoned in the tent, the king's-tongue deadening every sensation.

At the crest of the rising slope, Fahil waited. He asked Isi a question, and she shook her head.

"What did he say?" asked Enna.

"He wanted to know if I needed a donkey for the climb, and I said I was all right if I could take his arm."

Enna frowned. "Why's he worried, Isi? Are you sicker than you're telling me?"

Isi smiled, bit her lip, and looked down. "He thought that, um, he said, maybe the climb would be easier on a donkey for an expectant mother."

Enna stared blankly at Isi; then understanding rushed through her. "Oh, Isi. Mercy, Isi, I'm a fool. That's the extra heat I was sensing." She glanced at the bulge of Isi's belly. Though her loose tunic hid it well, Enna had to wonder how she had missed it all those weeks.

"What do you think of that, Finn?"

Finn shrugged. "Well, I sort of guessed."

"So, it's just me who's blind." She grabbed Isi's hand and kissed it. "That's wonderful. I'm so happy for you. Do you feel all right?"

Isi nodded. Her smile pushed her cheeks up. "Oh, I've felt better in my life, but I'm certainly happy about it. Geric and I have been wishing for this."

"Geric'll have my hair as it is for keeping you away from him all this time, especially— For pity's sake, Isi, did you know about this when we left Bayern?"

Isi shook her head. "I wasn't sure until we were well on the road. I guess I should've known since I was probably three months along when we left, but my mind was pretty well absorbed in other things."

“So, how long, until—”

“Another three months, I think,” said Isi.

Three months. Enna considered how it took them over two months just to get to Yasid from Bayern’s capital. And Isi was carrying the future heir of Bayern’s throne. And Geric was likely frantic at home in her absence and had no idea she was pregnant. This quest was not all about her. Suddenly so much more was at stake. She felt a new weight pressing her to end it, and a new fear that she would fail. She could not fail Isi again.

It was a difficult climb in the dark, and Enna scraped her hands a couple of times after tripping on jagged rocks.

“Let me carry you,” said Finn.

“No.” She was through being a burden. Besides, the little pain from the scratches was pleasantly distracting her from the cold dread.

The hilltop was flat and paved with smooth stones. Benches surrounded a stone pillar the height of a woman. On top, a brazier blazed with fire.

“It’s their eternal flame,” said Isi. She spoke with Fahil to confirm. “This flame has been burning for over six hundred years.”

Another man had been standing beside the altar. He stepped back as Fahil moved forward. Fahil spoke, looking straight at Enna. His sharp, raspy words seemed to burn her even before she understood his meaning. Isi was slow to translate. Enna shivered, waiting for the sting.

“He says he’s been talking with the others, and they agree the best option is to try to burn the fire out of you, as quickly as possible.”

Enna looked at Fahil. His face was dark, his back to the fire. He was shadow against the light.

“Burn it out,” said Enna. “How will he do it?”

Fahil had a pair of metal tongs. He dipped them into the fire and pulled out a burning coal. The flames pulled inside, pulsing like a red heart within the blackness.

“He’ll place the coal against the tip of your tongue and then you are to squeeze it in your hands. He’ll burn the first word of fire from your tongue and burn away the acts of fire you performed. He believes that then the fire won’t remember you anymore.”

Enna winced. “But the fire is inside of me. . . . ”

“Fahil believes the symbol of this ceremony will cure you,” said Isi. Even in the darkness, Enna could see her face was pale. “Enna, I don’t think you should. We don’t even know if it’ll work.”

“I’m going to do it,” said Enna. “We’ve got to get you home. You’re carrying the heir to Bayern.”

Isi took a step toward her. “But if this does nothing but burn your tongue and hands . . . ”

“I want to do this, Isi,” said Enna. “I’m ready.” She did not know if she believed in this ceremony, and the thought of the pain made her queasy, but she wanted to show Isi that she was willing, that she would atone for what she had done. She had caused so much pain—it only felt right that she should have to sacrifice in return.

“Wait, Enna, don’t.” Finn took her by the shoulders, and she tried not to meet his eyes, afraid to be talked out of her decision. “We can take time, see if you heal on your own. We can.”

Enna felt her eyes prick and burn. Finn awoke some of the sadness inside her, and it choked against the dread lodged in her chest. “We’ve got to get Isi back before the baby comes. And I haven’t got time, Finn. I feel that now.”

“That fire, it’s like it makes you hopeless, Enna, but you can’t believe it. You’re not going to die.”

Enna opened her mouth to protest, then coughed against the rising heat inside her. Her frustration weakened her control, and it rushed through the cracked place in her chest. She wiped her brow and took an unsteady step.

“Isi,” she said.

A wind answered, pushing away the searing heat. When she could see clearly again, Fahil was wide-eyed and jabbering at Isi.

“What is it?” Enna asked.

Isi was listening, nodding, her brows high and her look hopeful. “He didn’t know until now that I knew the wind-speaking. And he says, wind erases things, like footsteps in the sand. He says, even an immense fire can be like a candle flame in the mouth of a great wind.”

“You want to try to blow out the fire in me?” asked Enna.

Isi nodded. “Fahil, he says he’d thought of that, wondered if somehow he could use the rain speech to work against your fire, but that it was too rushed and that he doesn’t know you. To work such things on another, he said, requires understanding and intimacy. Enna, I know you. I could try with wind.”

“It’ll be just like when you send wind to relieve the fever, but . . . ”

“But harder, yes,” said Isi, finishing Enna’s sentence. “Much harder. And different. He says, he’s telling me how I might do it. I have to—surrender in a way to the wind. I think I can, Enna. I’ve felt the temptation before but never knew what would happen.”

“Isi, please try,” said Finn.

Enna nodded. Hope made her tremble.

Finn let her go and withdrew. Enna and Isi stood facing each other, alone on the paved center of the hilltop. The wind started. At first it was like any of the breezes Isi used to cool the fever, but it swelled so that it tore at Enna’s own life heat around her body, pulling it loose and releasing it into the air.

Then it grew stronger.

Her headscarf came loose and her hair whipped around her face. She began to feel a tearing pain. She opened her mouth to scream, but she could not breathe, and the wind rushed into her throat and poured inside her, ripping through her cracked place, gushing through her body. It was taking something away. She felt fear with the pain, afraid that she was losing all of herself. She could not open her eyes, but she reached out and stumbled forward, her hands finding Isi’s. She gripped on to her friend, trying to anchor part of herself before the wind took it all.

Surrender. She tried. But each time she began to release her carefully guarded control of the fire, pain burst from her chest. *If it leaves me, I’ll die*, she thought, and held on tighter. Her muscles ached and trembled, her chest gushed with heat. She fought and struggled, terrified of losing everything.

Enna became conscious of Isi’s hand trembling in hers. She let go and stumbled away, and the wind stopped short like a held breath. Enna gasped to fill her lungs and sat on the ground. Isi sat beside her.

“I’m sorry, Isi,” she said. “I can’t let it go. I tried. But it hurts, and it seems so wrong, and I’m so afraid there won’t be anything left.”

Isi took deep breaths, then spoke softly. “What do we do?”

Enna shook her head. She knew only that she did not want to surrender, not as she had with Sileph and not as she had on the battlefield. She glanced at Finn, and the look in his eyes struck her so hard, she felt her body reel. He trusted her. He had complete faith that if she thought the wind was not working, then it was so, and she would find another way.

“I don’t deserve you,” she said to him.

Surprisingly, he laughed in good humor. “Enna,” he said, as though she had told a good joke.

Fahil crouched beside Isi and together they spoke in the southern tongue. It sounded like a desperate conversation conveying little hope.

“I’m sorry, Finn,” said Enna. “It might’ve worked, but for me. Surrender. That’s what I’m supposed to do.” Her stomach seized at the thought, and she swayed. “I can’t surrender anymore. I’m so afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“Dying?” She shook her head. “No, I guess not that. I’m afraid of being the person who let my friends down, of surrendering so that the fire is in charge, the fire that kills, or of surrendering to survive like I did in Eylbold when I was under Sileph’s control. Of losing myself again.”

Finn held her hand and looked at her palm thoughtfully. “I surrendered in Eylbold. They grabbed Razo. They said they’d cut his throat if I didn’t throw down my sword. So I did. That felt right to me.” He met her eyes. “Maybe there’s more than one kind of surrender.”

Another kind. Finn had not given himself away in Eylbold. He had made a choice to save Razo. Fahil’s voice rose in concern, and Enna looked toward them. Isi was blinking a lot, and though she held herself straight, Enna could tell her friend was suffering under the heavy voice of the wind.

“Finn,” Enna said quietly, “Isi’s been bad all this trip, hasn’t she?”

Finn nodded.

“As bad as I am?”

“Well,” said Finn, looking at their friend, “she doesn’t have the fever. I haven’t been as worried, you know. But she’s not like she used to be. She’s been tired, and sad.”

Enna felt her cheeks burn hotter in humiliation. In these last months she had scarcely thought of Isi. Her attention was absorbed in herself, in her grand mission that would stop the war, but also in her gift, in the idea that it might make her as special as she hoped to be. And lately, she was taken up in her fever and in her fear of losing what marked her as extraordinary. All this time, why was she not worrying instead about poor, haunted Isi?

As her emotions rose, her control weakened and the heat pushed in, hot hands pressing her from all sides. She did not call to it, did not gather it in, the heat just found her now. She imagined it sensed its language on her skin, the way a blind dog knows its master. It was that unwanted gathering of heat that was so unbearable, as it was the constant touch and speech of

the wind that tormented Isi. She stared at Isi as these thoughts pieced together, and she could feel her heart beat harder.

"You learned the wind in one moment, Isi," said Enna. "It only took one word. You know many languages. You can learn another."

Isi looked up and seemed surprised by the energy in Enna's voice.

"What are you thinking, Enna?" asked Finn.

Enna smiled despite the pain. "I can teach her the fire. I thought about it for weeks with Sileph. I think he could've learned, and I know Isi can. We don't need the vellum, I remember everything it said. And fire is a quick language, Isi. It catches onto you and starts to burn."

"But, Enna . . . ," said Isi.

"It makes sense. Wind senses its language on you. That's why it's drawn to you even when you don't call it, right? What you need is something that will keep the voice of the wind a step off. Well, why aren't the *tata-rook* overwhelmed like we are? The rain doesn't completely put out their knowledge of fire. If it did, they'd be bothered by the voice of rain all the time. No, both rain and fire are near them at once, tempering each other. Rain quenches heat, fire burns away water, keeping both their voices away until they call to one or the other. Ask Fahil."

Isi spoke to the older man. "He agrees that this might be so."

"So," said Enna with a smile. "That's fire and rain. Now think of how we work fire and wind together, Isi. Think of that night outside Ostekin when . . . when I sent heat at you, and you just pushed it away with the wind before it became fire. And that night when we camped, when I sent heat to break up your wind and scatter it. They can either build each other bigger or smother each other out. It's not exactly how fire and water work, but I'm thinking that wind and heat affect each other all the same. If you added my fire to your wind, I think both would keep the other at bay. Wind brushes away the heat, heat changes and scatters the wind, and neither voice would be able to get close to you unless you called. Just like with the *tata-rook*."

"Maybe," said Isi. "But what about you?"

Enna brushed off the question with a wave and leaned closer. Excitement made her forget the fever. "Never mind me. I really believe this will work for you, Isi. Add fire knowledge and the wind can't press on you so."

Fahil wondered what Enna had in mind, and when Isi told him, he was quiet a moment, a tender smile on his lips. Enna shook Finn's tunic front.

"It's going to work, Finn. I know it is. Isi's going to be better."

“Enna,” said Isi, turning from Fahil, “he says it’s a good plan. And he says it could work both ways.”

Enna blinked. “How?”

“I described to him how we worked fire and wind together to chase off those two soldiers, and he thinks our friendship, our closeness, will be a bridge, that we can share the elements with each other. I tried long ago to teach Geric the wind, and it didn’t work. But you already know one language—maybe you can learn.”

Finn sighed with relief. “Good. You should do this, Enna, and no one’s going to lick coals.”

Enna did not know about learning the wind. It seemed so mysterious to her and something so completely Isi’s. But she agreed, determined at least that Isi would profit. The girls sat knee to knee. Fahil stood before the brazier, and Finn sat on a stone watching the girls, his hand on his sword hilt, ready in case there was something to fight.

They began by talking low. Enna wanted Isi to know what she had learned from the vellum. She explained how heat was in the air, where it came from, how she felt it, plucked it, pulled it inside, and the now subconscious gesture of turning the heat into flame inside her chest. Isi tried to explain how the wind felt when it touched her, what it felt like inside when she understood its subtle speech, how she saw and heard and felt the images it carried and yet with a sense that was neither her eyes nor ears nor skin. It was difficult to explain, and after a time Enna realized both had stopped speaking. They held hands, as they had when they faced the soldiers, and Enna became more aware of Isi.

Learn, she urged silently. *Feel the heat. Learn it.*

She focused on the place in her chest that leaked heat, on the swaths of it that hung around her face, and she tried to will it away from her, to make the heat aware of Isi. Strings of heat stretched between Enna and her friend. It was a strange sensation, almost as if Enna touched Isi but not with her fingers. Then she felt a breeze.

It curled off Isi, around their clasped hands, up Enna’s wrists. The breeze felt as familiar as a touch from a friend. It had a sense of Isi about it. She seemed to know which direction it would flow before it moved, as she often knew what Isi would say before she finished a sentence. She was tempted to try to pull the breeze inside her, as she did with the heat, but she guessed it would not work that way. Feeling that it might be speaking, she tried to

listen, straining with all her senses, with her ears and mind and skin, and with that part of her that could feel heat.

The wind grew stronger, as though it sensed her desperation. It beat Enna's hair against her cheeks. It began to tear at her, and inside the ear-piercing howling there was a kind of silence. She reached out toward the wind again and realized with a start that what she hoped to touch was Leifer. She could see his face so distinctly in memory that it was as though he stood before her, and her heart ached for him. She marveled that at such a moment her thoughts turned to him, and she realized suddenly and with a twisting ache in her heart that she had never wept for his death. The cold rush of the wind made her aware that she was crying now, and her chest thumped with a sob.

All this time, she thought, *I've been clinging to Leifer.* The fire felt like the last tie that bound them together, across life and death.

I can give it up, I can. Inside her, fire raged defensively. Heat stung her skin, leaked from her chest, seemed enough to fill the world. She felt herself slipping again and remembered what Fahil had said: *If she sleeps again, she might not wake.* Enna refused to faint, focused on Isi, and sent all her thoughts toward healing her. Her hands found Isi's bare neck and wrist, hoping that just by touch she could spread the heat. She felt some of the fire sigh from her chest. The heat lessened but slid over everything, so that she could not tell which part of the touch was her own hands or Isi's skin.

The wind did not pause, and Enna knew Isi was sending it at her, insistent. With that place inside her where she kept not only memories of her brother, but the feeling of him, she struggled to listen. The wind thrashed against her skin, and she pushed her senses out toward it, feeling toward it, listening from the inside.

Heat flowed between them. The wind battered them, pushing them closer together. A voice she did not know said, *Enna.*

She gasped. She wanted to scream back, *I'm here! I'm Enna*, but she did not know how. *Enna*, she heard again. The word seemed to enter her where she felt the fire in her chest, then yawn up her throat until it found a place in her mind that understood, that place where she still held Leifer. It was the voice of the wind speaking her name, as cool as a stream bath, soft and plain and easy.

The howling stopped, and the wind slipped into breezes that teased the fine hairs of her skin. Slowly Enna opened her eyes. Something was

different. She believed they had been sitting there minutes, or perhaps even hours, but surely not long enough for the seasons to change. Nevertheless, the night felt cooler, like a summer's night in Bayern, rich and fragrant and welcome after a hot day.

Fahil was holding Finn back from going to Enna, but when he saw her look up, he let Finn go. Finn rushed to her side. He smoothed her hair from her brow. His voice was tight with fear.

"Enna, you're all right? Are you?"

"I think so." Dizzily, she leaned into Finn's chest and gripped his tunic. Isi was staring up at a sky prickly with stars. "How are you, Isi? Did it work?"

"I don't know," Isi said. "Everything's so quiet. Did I lose the wind completely?"

Enna closed her eyes and felt around her. The air appeared to be in motion, the heat and the wind moving around each other, swirling together, pushing off, and her sense of them was dimming.

"See if the wind still understands you," said Enna.

A breeze moved across the ground, lifting dust, snaking up Enna's leg, against her wrist, then touching her cheek.

"Still there, just not so close," said Isi. "A breeze came when I beckoned, but not before. Amazing."

"So, did it work, then? Is it the fire?"

Isi closed her eyes, a line of concentration between her brows. Enna felt like holding her breath. After a few moments, a clump of dead grass on the ground between them sparked with a tiny fire. Isi opened her eyes and laughed.

"And you, Enna? Are you all right?"

The breeze moved through Enna's hair, and she thought she could hear a whisper—no, not hear, feel. She felt its touch and saw an image and understood it as a word. She could not speak to it, could not ask it to go this way or that. She remembered that such control took Isi much time to learn. But if she strained, she could hear its image speech on her skin, how it carried the idea of what it had touched before to each new contact. A cool finger of air against her cheek and a bright thought in her mind. *Enna*. It named her. *Enna, Finn, our lady, the man of fire and water, the air full of dust.*

“I hear it,” Enna said stiffly, afraid to move, as though the breeze could be frightened away like a flock of pheasants.

Was the fire gone? No, she could still detect the heat swirling away from Finn, twisting through her fingers and hair, then passing on. It did not stick to her, did not claw at her skin.

Fahil left off speaking happily with the other *tata-rook* to go to Isi. He knelt beside her, asking questions, and Isi responded in light, content tones.

“How do you feel?” said Finn.

Enna thought. She could still draw heat to her, but it did not come unbidden, and for the first time in weeks she breathed air free of heat. She did not feel the heat tease her and gnaw at her, just sensed that it was, but that it could be ignored. She looked inward and felt that the cracked place inside her had not healed, but it no longer leaked rivers of fever heat into her body. It felt now less like the tethered falcon tearing to escape than a sleeping bird, tired and warm.

“Good. Unbelievably good. Isi?”

Isi was leaning against Fahil. “I’m all right.” She paused, then smiled broadly. “Yes, I know I am. Everything’s so quiet.” She sighed. “I’d forgotten what it felt like to be normal. The winds are still there, if I seek them, but they’re hushed now and keep to themselves.”

“You have . . . ,” said Enna.

“Balance,” said Isi. “The heat changes and pushes the wind. . . . ”

“And the wind takes the breath from the fire.”

Isi laughed, happy as a child. “I can scarcely believe we did it, Enna. Both of us. Geric will be so relieved to see me better, he might even think the absence was worth it.”

Finn breathed out. “That wasn’t so bad, then. And I thought someone was going to have to die before it was over.”

“And I’ll bet you were hoping it’d be you,” said Enna.

Finn looked serious. “Well, I wasn’t *wanting* to die, but if it had to be one of the three of us, I hoped I could jump in a fire first or something.”

Enna held Finn’s cheeks and shook him. “I was kidding! Oh, Finn, you are too good.” And she gave him an ardent kiss, a kiss that meant maybe, after all, the world would not burn and everything would be all right.

Enna laughed, feeling as though something had sat on her shoulders for months and just stepped off. She grabbed Finn’s hands with the wild notion that she might float away.

Isi laughed, too, and Enna noticed how Isi's belly wobbled with her laugh, so that made her laugh more. And of course Finn could never resist whenever he heard Enna's laugh. Fahil stared at them as though they were crazy, which was, of course, even funnier.

Chapter 21

Fahil thought they should rest a few more days after the ordeal on the hilltop, but Enna insisted they leave the next morning.

"If I don't get my best friend home soon, she'll pop," said Enna. "Translate that, Isi."

Isi had some gold coins in her saddlebag that they traded to Fahil for supplies. After Isi talked with Fahil about the possibilities of renewing trading between the two lands and much thanking in two languages, the Bayern set on the road for home.

The change in the two girls was immediate, though it seemed even to improve day by day. Enna felt freed from the prison of heat that had been building around her since the first word of fire, and the voice of the wind did not press in. Both were there, but holding each other back, just out of reach. Relief at last from the fever was almost unbearably wonderful, but even better was seeing Isi look around at the world with a forgotten smile on her lips, her face peaceful, at last at rest from the voice of the wind.

Though it was on Enna's mind, they did not speak aloud about how what happened on that hilltop might affect a baby. Enna was relieved to detect a healthy amount of heat from Isi's middle, and Isi said the creature still did flip-flops as much as ever, so they hoped.

There was much time for such thoughts, as the road home was slow. For Isi's sake, they never dared push their horses past a walk. Avlado was good at walking smoothly and slowly for his pregnant rider.

They followed the same path home, keeping to the stream Isi called the Small Suneast for as long as possible. Enna despised the taste of its water and named it the Horse-spittle. Finn always called it Enna's Stream. He tended to refer to most anything as belonging to her—Enna's Meadow, Enna's Mountain. When he referred to Yasid as Enna's Kingdom, she said, "Isn't that your heart?"

Finn smiled and kissed her hand. Isi rolled her eyes.

"Oh, you two are impossible."

Enna laughed. “This coming from the girl who calls her husband ‘sweet little bunny boy’?”

Isi blushed. “That was just once.”

Isi could not hide her longing for Geric. She observed Finn’s affection for Enna, and it seemed to make her both happy and sad. Enna returned once from washing in the stream to find Isi holding her belly, laughing and crying at once and not sure why she was doing either.

Isi’s belly doubled in size before they crossed the Bayern border, and so, seemingly, did her aches and complaints. Near the end, they rode half days and then let Isi rest and eat. She alternated between nausea and ravenous hunger.

“How’s your back? How’s your belly? Are you well?” Enna asked continually.

“Hush up for five minutes, will you?” Isi got grumpier and grumpier and insisted on taking more than her fair share of turns lighting their cookfires as her ability with fire improved. Finn seemed to find Enna’s overattentiveness and Isi’s mood changes completely delightful.

Enna was anxious to get Isi to Geric and see the baby born healthy, but beyond that, she was hesitant to return to her kingdom and face the consequences of her burning. *Perhaps,* she thought, *Finn and I could see Isi safe home and slip away to the Forest.* The thought was disappointing, because now, with the languages of both fire and wind dwelling inside her, Enna was sure she could serve Bayern well. Her hopes of being useful were extinguished by the heavy certainty that she could not be forgiven.

Once they crossed into Bayern, they followed roads that led them past inns. When Enna could, she sent messages to Geric: “Fourteen days south, Oily Parchment Inn, your wife is expecting”; “Eight days south, the Pinched Nose, Isi is *huge*”; “Five days south, the Silver Hart, I hope you get at least one of these, because you are soon to be a father whether you are here or not.”

Enna suggested they just settle into an inn until the baby came, but Isi insisted they ride on each morning, determined to make it to the palace and Geric before the baby came. Then, passing by a village just outside the Forest and two days’ ride from the capital, she changed her mind.

“Aah, aaah, ahhh!” She dismounted, grabbed Enna’s hand so tightly that she drew blood with her fingernails, walked straight into the nearest

cottage, and plopped down on a bed. Enna nodded to the startled cottage dwellers.

"It's the queen, you see," said Enna. "She's going to have a baby in your house. You don't mind?"

When the pains really started, Isi jabbered madly in the language of the south, bird tongue, and some curse words that made the cottage owner blush and his wife laugh. The pains came and went for hours, and Isi was red faced and sweaty and tired, and sometimes she cried a little. Just before sundown, a noise made her stop midholler. From outside came the rumbling rhythm of hoofbeats, then the whinnying of a horse who stopped suddenly. The door flung open. It was Geric.

"Isi, I'm here, I'm here."

And it was, as well, half the court.

Geric rushed to Isi's side, palace physicians gathered around the bed, a birth mistress pushed them all away again, the chief steward took command of the cottage kitchen and fire, a hundred-band was heard to position themselves in a defensive posture all around the building, and voices from outside told them that many more people had gathered. Enna sighed, relieved that at least one of her messages had made it to the capital ahead of them.

When the birth mistress had her way, all but Geric and one capable nurse-mary were shooed from Isi's bed and out the door. Finn took Enna's hand, and they walked into the cutting light of a bright summer evening and the midst of a small crowd. Enna squinted into the setting sun to see what was happening. They were all looking at her.

Several people, some of them Forest dwellers she had long known, pushed some cut logs up by the door and pressed her to step on top of one. She looked up, afraid to see a noose waiting for her. Talone appeared. The crowd quieted their whispering.

"Talone, I'm sorry," she said.

He nodded. "Perhaps this is not the place for such business, but as it is the first time we've seen you for some time, and who knows where you will slip to after this, I have little choice." He raised his voice for the crowd. "Enna of the Forest, for disobeying a war captain and treacherous acts, you are hereby stripped of your title of queen's maiden."

The crowd murmured, and someone shouted angrily. Enna was not sure if it was directed at her. Talone cleared his throat.

“I’m certain this is not the queen’s wish, but acts must be accounted for. However, we won’t stop there. For stubborn bravery and ingenuity in defense of the kingdom, His Highness bids me make you one of Bayern’s Own, a member of the king’s personal hundred-band.”

“Wait, Talone,” she said, “I don’t deserve—”

“Don’t interrupt, please.” He turned back to the crowd. “She fought in secret, she was captured and imprisoned, and she escaped in time to stop Tira’s invading force before they could overwhelm our army and invade the capital.” He took her hand and held it aloft. “Never has Bayern seen such a warrior.”

The crowd did not hesitate when it burst into applause and cheers. More hands pushed Finn up beside her, and she saw someone else step up. Her eyes were bleary now, and she had to blink several times before she could make out his face.

“Razo!”

“You might’ve waited for me to heal before you went off again,” he said. “Though I see Finn found you all right. Hello there, Finn. Well done.”

“Hello, Razo. Enna loves me, did you hear?”

Razo laughed. “Of course she does. See, Enna, I told you someday people’d chant our names.”

Enna listened to the calls and did not detect any chanting, so began to say quietly, “Razo, Razo.” He punched her shoulder.

Enna felt strange atop that stump, the cheers of the people touching her like soft slaps, a combination of aggression and love. The village was not far from the field where she had burned a tenth of the army of Tira. A day from there stood the place where she had dragged Leifer’s body to the funeral pyre. The heat from the crowd wafted around her, the breeze that touched her skin told her of clapping hands. So much had changed in a year, she felt stretched and twisted like poorly used cloth. After all this, who would she be? Finn squeezed her hand.

“Go on, Enna-girl,” said Razo, “why aren’t you smiling? I’d think this would be your scene.”

Enna shrugged. “Maybe I’ve changed.”

Razo rolled his eyes. “What a lot of rot.” He grabbed her hand and held it up. “For Bayern!”

And the crowd cheered.

As the sun set, villagers joined in the celebration, lighting fires and warming cider. At last they heard the sharp crack of a baby's first wail. Finn and Enna looked at each other with relief. It was a healthy, loud cry. The birth mistress emerged and signaled that Enna could come, with Razo, Talone, and Finn following.

Isi's face was streaked with sweat, but her eyes sparkled. Geric's eyes were wet and cheeks pressed with an unvarying smile, and when he held the baby he seemed completely unable to acknowledge that anyone else existed. At last he relinquished his hold and placed the newborn carefully in Enna's eager arms.

"A boy," said Geric. "After Isi's father—Tusken."

"If it'd been a girl," said Isi, "we were going to call her Enna-Isilee."

"Oh, there'll be others," said Enna.

Geric's eyes widened and he smiled with pure, boylike joy at the thought.

"How does he look to you?" asked Isi.

Enna touched his doe-soft skin. "Perfect. Completely perfect."

She cooed at Tusken, and he looked up at her, almost as if he saw her with his wide, pale eyes. Her heart ached to see such beauty. She touched the healthy folds of skin around the baby's neck, wrists, and thighs, the dark lines crying for life made in his forehead, and thought how people start with wrinkles and end with wrinkles, grow into their skin and then live to grow out of it again.

Just then, Enna felt at home in her own skin, not stretched or sagged or scorched. Everything felt right. Outside, the voice of merriment. Inside, a good fire crackled in the hearth, Geric knelt beside Isi's bed kissing her hands, and a healthy baby stared at his new world.

Enna was glad to have Finn's hand on her own, and that his skin felt right next to hers. She could feel the quiet, good heat in his touch and thought that it was all she would ever need feel. From the Forest, through the window, came a wisp of wind to twine through her hair. She listened to where it touched her neck—*a spring, muddy banks, wasps buzzing, mushrooms climb a pine, a pine needle falls.*

She was home.

The End




NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANNON HALE
River Secrets
The Books of Bayern
BLOOMSBURY

The Books of Bayern



River Secrets

SHANNON HALE



BLOOMSBURY
NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

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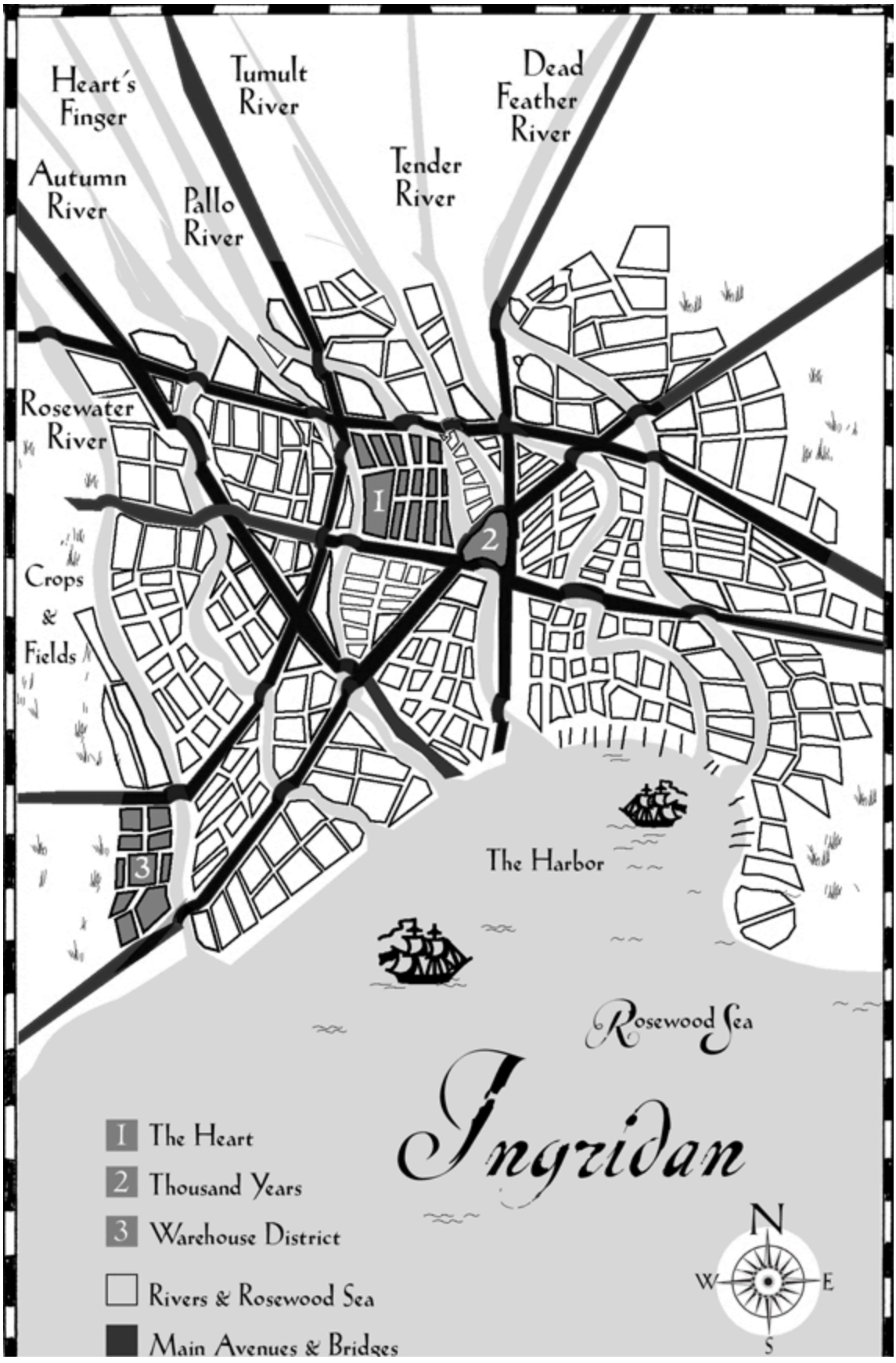
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For all the boys in my family

But especially, triumphantly, adoringly
for the one and only
Max Stonebreaker Hale




Bavara Mountains
Lake Meginhard
Kildenree
Great City Valley
The Capital
Bayern
Kiel
The Forest
Thick Pines, Ravines
Ingridan
Unclaimed Lands
Stony Ground, Bogs
Sunseat River
Tira
Grasslands, Plains
Rosewood Sea
Quapah
Yasid
Desert
N
W
E
S


Heart's Finger
Tumult River
Dead Feather River
Tender River
Autumn River
Pallo River
Rosewater River
1
2
Crops & Fields
3
The Harbor
Rosewood Sea
Ingridan
1 The Heart
2 Thousand Years
3 Warehouse District
Rivers & Rosewood Sea
Main Avenues & Bridges
N
W
E
S

A river has its secrets
Far under folds of water
Deeper than the buried dark
Where all is slick and softer

A fire has its secrets
Dancing bare before your eyes
Trimmed in heat and lost in gold
Something in its brightness lies

A boy has his secrets
His fist clasped tight as stone
Watching water, spying fire
In a crowded room, alone



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Prologue



Ingridan was an ancient city. Memory ached in its stone arches, crept down its narrow alleys, sluiced through its seven rivers. And its newest memory still burned, raw and sore—a failed war, a nation shamed, and an army dishonored.

On the western edge of Ingridan, just across the Rosewater River, someone watched a man die. The man had been poor and desperate for a bit of coin, but now he was just dead, his body black from burning.

When the smoke cleared, the watcher dragged the corpse out of the nearly empty warehouse, rolled it into the river, and kept watch as it floated into the sea.

“They will pay for making me do this,” spoke the voice that no one else heard. “I’ll see Bayern in flames.”

1

A Journey South

Razo hopped up and down, but he could see only backs of heads. Soldiers and courtiers lined the grand hall, craned their necks, stood on toes. And everyone was taller than him.

"That's just perfect," Razo muttered.

Rumors had been buzzing all week that something weighty would be announced today, and now here he was without a hope of a decent view. If only he were in the Forest and could just climb a tree.

He looked up. Then again . . .

Razo squeezed to the outer wall of the chamber and leaped at a tapestry, just catching the lower fringe. A brief sound of tearing, quick as the squeak of a mouse in a trap, and he found himself dangling above a hundred heads, waiting for a terrifying rip to send him down. The tapestry shivered, then held, so Razo crossed his eyes once for luck and climbed up.

He pushed his feet against the wall and sprang onto the decorative shelving. At last he had an agreeable view of his friends Isi and Geric, Bayern's queen and king, seated on a dais three steps below their thrones. Beside them were the white-robed emissaries from Tira and a handful of Tiran soldiers who, Razo imagined, had been handpicked for looking brutish and menacing.

The yellow-haired Tiran woman was speaking. ". . . years of animosity cannot be quickly forgotten, yet we see the benefit of forming an acquaintance with Bayern as we have not for many hundreds of years."

"That is our wish as well," said Geric, "and so we propose an exchange of ambassadors. This spring, we'll send one of our own south to live among the Tiran people in the capital city of Ingridan."

"By the authority of the people of Tira, our assembly, and our prince," said the Tiran woman, "we accept Bayern's invitation and likewise will

send our ambassador to live in your capital."

The crowd creaked with astonished silence. One lean Tiran soldier glared at Geric and thumbed the hilt of his sword.

"Great crows," Razo whispered, his belly filling with cold. Just over a year ago, Tira had invaded Bayern with the intention of wiping out the Bayern army, hanging their king and queen, and claiming Bayern land as its own. In a terrible battle last spring, Bayern had finally overcome the invasion and won a rickety peace. Razo had served as a scout and soldier for Bayern and had no desire to roll around again in that whole mess of a war. He staunchly believed that seventeen years was too young to die. Even so, asking Bayern to welcome a Tiran into their midst already was a mighty sticky solution.

The Tiran woman was speaking again. "Know that the wounds of war won't heal easily. Burns can't stop stinging under such a mild salve. . . ."

*Burns.*The crowd rustled. It was clear she was alluding to the last battle of the war and the mysterious Bayern fire-speaker who had burned one-tenth of the Tiran army.

Razo smirked. It suddenly seemed such a laugh, those angry Tiran completely unaware that the fire-speaker herself was just five paces away.

Enna stood behind Queen Isi's chair, slouching a tad, as though trying to communicate that the gathering was killed and done for already. Her formal tunic was deep red with beads around the neck, and her black hair was loose and growing unchecked to the middle of her back. Occasionally her lips moved and her eyes glanced sideways, as if she were whispering something droll to Finn beside her.

Enna seemed so careless. Yet if those Tiran soldiers discovered she was the secret fire-speaker, Razo realized they would not hesitate to part her head from her shoulders. Suddenly, it did not seem such a laugh. He scratched his neck and clambered back down.



An hour later, Razo was napping on the floor of Geric's antechamber when toes tickled his side. He squirmed and squinted with one eye to see Isi standing above him.

"There you are, Razo! We're meeting in my receiving room. Will you come?"

“Yet another glorious meeting? I’m really tempted, Isi, but you know my schedule right now is—”

“There’s food.”

Razo leaped up. “I’m right behind you.”

A large soldier with dark, shaggy hair walked the corridor ahead of them, peering into open doorways.

“I found him, Finn,” said Isi, “asleep on a floor, just like you thought he’d be.”

“What do you mean?” Razo rubbed his nose. Sleepiness always made it itch. “I’m not *that* predictable.”

“You told him there’d be food, didn’t you?” Finn asked.

“The only way he’d come.”

“Hmph,” said Razo. Finn gave his arm a friendly knock.

Razo was relieved to find the mood in the receiving room had shrugged off the itchy stiffness of that day’s formal assembly—at least, Conrad was laughing loudly as he arm-wrestled Geric, even though a couple of ministers frowned in their direction. Conrad was a friend of Razo and Isi from years ago, and since the death of Geric’s young brother, the king seemed to have taken to Conrad as more family than friend. Enna was lounging in a chair, and a handful of soldiers chatted at the table. But there was no food.

“That’s cruel, that is,” said Razo, and Isi patted his shoulder consolingly.

She took her three-month-old baby, Tusken, from a maid’s arms and asked her to bring in a plate of something sweet. So Razo stayed, lolling against the wall, half listening to Geric talk about the ambassador exchange, and practicing an expression of supreme indifference so that when he was not asked to go along, his face would not betray disappointment.

Why had Isi bothered to wake him for this meeting, anyway? She was wholly absorbed in Tusken now, cooing and smiling at him, though he was asleep and did nothing but occasionally twitch his lips or rub his nose. The purpose of babies eluded Razo. He supposed it would be different if he were a father, but that would require finding a wife.

And then, unasked for, a memory of Bettin spasmed behind his eyes. She was laughing and wrestling him to the ground to squish an overripe pear into his face. Up close, her eyes were almost green in their blackness.

“Hmph,” said Razo. Bettin was married now. To someone else. Remembering that produced an uncomfortable, creeping sensation across

his back, like the times he caught himself wanting to chat with an old friend, only to recall that the friend had been killed in the war.

"At spring thaw, we'll send our ambassador south," Geric was saying. "Isi believes trade is one way to pacify animosities, so we'll also convey a load of Bayern dyes, something the Tiran lack. Captain Talone, I'll ask you to lead the ambassador's guard and choose twenty of your own men."

That's hopeful, Razo thought. The gray-templed warrior was the leader of Bayern's Own, the king's personal hundred-band of soldiers, and Razo's own captain. Perhaps he'd have a chance to be a part of the adventure after all.

"Who knows what dangers you'll face?" Geric was saying. "We need boys who can keep a clear head, smart lads . . ."

That's two for me, Razo thought.

". . . strong, too . . ."

Uh . . .

". . . and good fighters."

Counts me out. Razo felt regret creeping into his expression, so he looked for something amusing to distract himself. There appeared to be a small hole in the rug. He stuck in his finger. Now it was a slightly bigger hole.

"Since we can't dispatch an army to protect the ambassador," said Talone, "I recommend Enna take part."

"Enna?" Isi sat up sharp, and the baby grumbled in his sleep. "Enna, you can't go. If the Tiran people realize that you are the fire-speaker . . ."

Enna shrugged. "Most of them never saw me."

"You spent weeks in a Tiran-occupied town—"

"In a tent, with mostly just one other person—"

"Who's dead now, but other people saw you, Enna—"

"Other people I'm not likely to meet in a city of hundreds of thousands of people—"

"There were soldiers in Eylbold who might be stationed in Ingridan's palace barracks."

"They were disgraced, Isi. I seriously doubt they'd be retained in a royal company."

Isi sighed and looked at Geric for support. He smiled sweetly at her, then frowned as he realized that she expected something. "What? You'd ask me to throw myself between you and Enna?"

“Captain,” said Isi, turning to Talone, her friend from years past and her only other countryman in Bayern. Often when speaking to him, her voice strayed from her adopted Bayern accent to the stiff, punctuated tones of Kildenree. “You must see the danger—if she is discovered, not only her safety but all of yours will be compromised.”

“I see a thousand dangers in this enterprise, my queen,” said Talone. “In Enna, we have a secret army. Nevertheless, if you judge best to keep her back . . .”

“No.” Enna lurched forward. “Please, Isi, don’t say I can’t. I need to go.”

“But, Enna—”

“Isi, listen, I need to do something with all this.” She thumped her chest, the place where she could pull heat inside her, change it somehow, then send it out to become fire. “I killed so many people in the war, did so much damage, and I swear to you, to all of you”—she turned, her gaze seizing everyone in the room—“that I won’t kill again. I’m so sorry about the times when I went too far, when I hurt people I didn’t mean to. And now I’ve got all this power at my fingertips and all this guilt burning a hole through me. If you can give me another chance, I want to prove I’m on Bayern’s side. I want to help.” She turned her eyes and her voice back to Isi. “Please, you understand, right?”

Isi nodded. “I do. And I’ll miss you.”

“Thanks, Isi,” Enna whispered, looking down. “Thank you.”

Isi smiled at her sleeping baby, her forehead pinched.

The conversation tumbled on. Talone named the soldiers he would invite to join the company, including Finn, asking them to go to Tira and remain there for the next year or as long as it took to formalize peace. They all accepted, though many gazed up into the hanging candlelight or down at their boots as if wondering how many of them would return home again.

Razo had beaten down his hope into thin, shaky gloom when he actually heard his own name.

“What?” he said, looking up from the hole in the carpet.

“I believe we will have need of your skills,” said Talone.

What skills? Razo almost asked. He knew he should be elated, but he felt knocked flat by surprise and too baffled to speak. After all, Finn as a choice made sense—he had become one of the best swordsmen in Bayern’s Own and was as dependable as nuts in autumn. Enna made sense—her talents with fire and wind made her more powerful than a room full of soldiers.

Conrad had been named, another Forest-born like Razo who was not too handy with a sword, but he was the best grappler in Forest or city. In fact, all the soldiers Talone had called were the best at something—sword or javelin, grappling or horse mastery. Razo knew he was best at nothing, except maybe cramming two cherries into a single nostril.

He did not have to hear the whispers to know what everyone was thinking—the only reason he had been chosen to join Bayern's Own was because of his part in ending the war. He and Finn had protected Enna while she had chased the Tiran army away during the last battle. That was all right, except Razo had taken a sword in the ribs and barely scraped by with his breath intact.

He did not have to hear the whispers, but he heard them all the same.

"A brave fool," one soldier had murmured to another when they'd thought Razo was asleep in the barracks. And there had been others. *A child that fell into his armor and didn't know how to get back out . . . A puppy dog with noble friends . . . The worst swordsman this company has ever boasted* . . . And Razo thought they must be right. Months he'd been a member of the Own and had never been asked to be a part of any assignment or counsel of importance. So why did Talone suddenly want him for the most important mission of all?

Razo realized everyone was still staring at him. He laughed self-consciously and said, "Of course I'll go, you know that."

"Excellent." Geric reached for the baby. "And now that's settled, so give me my boy."

Isi passed Tusken to his father. "Careful, he's still sleeping."

"He's been asleep long enough, and I haven't seen those huge blue eyes since early this morning, what with everything we've done today." Geric bounced Tusken in his arms until the baby produced a huge, toothless yawn, opened his eyes, and stared unblinking at his father. "Hello, there he is! You see, I knew he wanted to wake up."

Isi kissed Geric's cheek and laughed against his neck, calling him impossible. She picked up her blue skirts and sat on the floor next to Razo. Enna plopped down beside her, leaning against Finn and resting her feet on Isi's lap.

"It hardly seems a fair trade," said Isi, patting Enna's legs. "The company of my three best friends for Tiran dignitaries. If it weren't for Geric and Tusken, I'd trade the crown to go with you."

“I’m not worth a crown,” said Enna. “Well, maybe a handful of jewels.”

“*My* handful, maybe,” said Finn. “Your hands are too tiny.”

“Fair enough.” Enna took Finn’s sword hand and rubbed the calluses on his palm.

Isi began to pull her yellow hair free of its pins. “At least you’ll have the winter to spend at home.”

“So,” said Razo, simmering with excitement and unable to sit on the question a moment longer, “why did Talone choose me, do you think?”

“To give us a good laugh,” said Enna.

Razo tilted his head in his *be serious* expression.

“Who knows?” said Enna. “Who can read the mind of Captain Stoneface? But it’s bound to be more of an adventure with you along and twice as fun as potato mush fights.”

“Sounds like sticky business—”

“Tira or the food fights?”

“And if my luck holds up, I won’t be getting out of this without another scar. You either, Finn.”

“If you think you’ve never seen me angry,” said Isi, “just watch what happens if any of you goes and gets yourself hurt. If things turn ugly, just get out of there and come home.”

Razo sniffed. “What exactly do you think might happen?”

“Death, war, possibly some maiming,” said Enna.

Razo did not care. Out of one hundred of Bayern’s best soldiers, Talone had chosen him. Whatever the reason, Razo was determined to show his captain he had not made a mistake, no matter the cost.

2

A Rumble of Javelins

Before frost could thicken into snow, Razo hurried home for the winter. His mother's Forest house stood in a clearing of pine trees, encircled by the five cottages his older brothers had built for their own families.

Razo was shocked to find his little sister, Rin, suddenly taller than him—that is, she would have been taller if his hair lay down flat, which he made certain it never did. Sometimes when no one was looking, he ran a little pine sap through his hair, pulling his finger-length locks upright.

He passed the weeks chopping wood, slinging for squirrels and hares so his ma's dinner pot never lacked meat, wrestling his young nephews and nieces to the ground, and in turn being wrestled down by his legion of big brothers.

"But why do you have to go off again, Razo?" His mother ripped the hide off a dead hare, the latest offering from Razo's sling.

"I'm a member of Bayern's Own," said Razo. "It's the king's own hundred-band, the best of the soldiers, and I'm one of them. It's an honor. It's like . . ." He could think of nothing in her own life to compare it with. The thought made him feel already hundreds of leagues away.

When early spring began to shiver the cold from the air, Razo's excitement tickled him awake at first light. *Talone chose me,* he remembered. *I'm going on an urgent, dangerous mission. Me, Razo of the Forest.* He spent two days working till dark to ready his ma for the next marketday, then made his farewells. Rin became quiet and fluttery as if she would miss him, which made his heart pinch. Brun, his oldest brother, grappled him into the hangman's hold.

"Not running after that Bettin again, are you, Razo?" said Brun. The other brothers laughed. At age fifteen, Razo had thought he was too young to propose marriage to the pretty, strong-armed Forest girl. Then, on hearing

that she was suddenly engaged to Offo, he had run across three days of Forest in two. He'd arrived before the wedding, red faced, triumphant, gasping for breath, and spewing words that sounded like poetry to his own ears. Bettin had just laughed and rubbed his head.

"But I love Offo," she'd said. "Good old Razo."

His brothers could tease him about his height or the number of scars he was collecting on his body. He could take the joke when they said he would die having never won a fair wrestling match. But the topic of Bettin still smarted too much. He'd imagined being with her always. Now when he closed his eyes, he had trouble imagining anything else.

But it was useless to fight back, so he just went limp in Brun's hold until his brother dumped him on the ground.

With a last kiss for his ma, Razo ambled on his way. He felt a chill skitter across his back and kept looking behind him, fearing that the Forest had folded in half and the homestead ceased to exist. His gut felt hollow, so he tried to fill it with his ma's nutty travel bread. That worked pretty well.

Two days of walking later, he found preparations in the capital well under way, horses exercised, barrels and casks loaded, tents rolled. Razo felt the energy like a muscle twitch. Journeys always took too long, but never as long as the readying.

He was hanging around the stables, chaffing the boys as they shoveled manure, when one of Bayern's Own, a wiry man with a nose that looked sharp enough to have its own sheath, came up close to Razo. He stank of ale and appeared to be proud of it.

"Perfect," Razo said under his breath.

"Ho there, sheep boy! I've been wanting you to explain something to me . . . to you, to me . . . about you going to Tira, huh? Why're you going, huh? And I'm not. That's what I'd like to know."

Razo winced. "You're aware that you smell like a privy?"

Two other soldiers gathered in behind the first, and emboldened by his friends, the man poked Razo in the shoulder. Several times. Razo gritted his teeth and kept his eyes on the ground. It never did any good to fight back.

"You're no soldier. You're just friends with the high and mighty, eh?"

"What's this, Razo?" Enna stalked away from her horse, brush still in hand. "Your pretty friends here are certainly loud about their opinions."

"This has nothing to do with you," said the man.

She folded her arms. “If you’ve a problem with *my* friend, then it has everything to do with me, Lord Puke Breath. Why don’t you explain the situation, I’m oh so eager to hear.”

In short order, there was a very pleasing shouting match going on. Razo settled back into a stack of hay to enjoy Enna at her best.

“Aren’t you going to help?” asked one of the stablehands.

Razo laughed. “Enna can handle three brawlers with her eyes closed. If there were twenty, then I might do something. I’d go find Finn.”

“I’d dig my own grave,” said another stable-hand, his back turned to Razo, “afore I’d sit back and let someone else fight my battle.”

Razo opened his mouth but found himself suddenly emptied of jokes. *Why fight my own battles if everyone else does it so much better?* he asked himself, but the thought irritated him, a bug bite he could not scratch.

By the time Talone finally heard the riot and took over, Enna had the soldiers looking like puppies with their tails between their legs.

“What *is* the ruckus?” A stout woman draped in too much yellow fabric came lumbering into the stable. She caught sight of Razo lounging in the hay. “Are you responsible for all this uproar? This is a work area and closed to loafers. Who are you?”

“I’m Razo, a member of Bayern’s Own,” he said, stopping himself from adding, “Loafing is just a hobby of mine.”

“Bayern’s Own? But you’re a child.”

Razo looked up to the sky. “I’m not a child, I’m just *short*.”

“Hm,” she said through her nose. “I don’t know what kind of man this Talone is to enlist boys. . . .”

“I am Talone,” he said, approaching. “And who are you to interfere with one of my men?”

“I’m Lady Megina, cousin to His Highness the king and chosen ambassador to Tira. I may as well tell you right now that I’ll expect cooperation from my military escort, not demands.”

Talone crossed his arms, appearing twice as wide. “Regardless, my men have one captain, and you are not it.”

Her eyes widened briefly, like the upward surge in flames when new fuel is added. “Very well. You’ll command your men, Captain Talone, and I’ll command you.”

They strode away in opposite directions while the stable-hands snickered into their shoulders.

Razo had heard of Lady Megina before, a childless widow of twenty years and cousin to the king. Geric had credited her for ending a water dispute in southeast Bayern and managing her brother's estate with precision. Still, she could have been nicer.

The night before departure, Isi and Geric held a feast for the travelers but had not shown up by the time the feasting began. Razo was on his second turkey leg and fifth berry pie when Isi climbed onto the bench next to him, resting her elbows on the table, her brow on her hands.

"What's happened?" asked Enna.

Isi met eyes with Talone, seated across from her. Her voice quavered. "We've had word from Tira. Over the winter, many Tiran citizens started calling for a return to war. It got quite bad, and to appease them, the assembly agreed to vote on the matter in the fall."

Finn shook his head and seemed likely to strike something.

"That won't give us much time," said Talone.

"*If* you go." Isi looked up, as though to keep her eyes dry. "I'm thinking of . . . of canceling the mission. By the time you arrived, Lady Megina would have less than a month to meet with the assembly members before they all leave for their summer estates. Once they return to Ingridan, she'd have two more weeks at most until the vote. It's not enough time to sway their opinion in favor of peace, and I'm afraid your company would have a tricky time just keeping her alive. Keeping all of you alive." She took Enna's hand and began to talk faster. "But I'm also so afraid that if you don't go, there'll be no chance. It's easy to believe complete strangers are your enemies. If they knew us . . . But how can you go, Talone? How can I bear to risk all of you? You'd be traveling into a hornets' nest."

Razo scratched at the flea bites on his arms, then realized they were goose bumps. He was not much fond of hornets' nests.

Talone stood. "Bayern's Own." The rattle of dishes stilled, all faces turned. "Our queen informs me that Tira has used the winter to stir up thoughts of war. If we go, the people just might decide to cut our throats one by one. The queen is giving us a choice. Even if we go, it's likely we will fail. Are you willing to take that chance? Will you march with me to Tira?"

The quiet that followed made the room feel tight and small and airless. Then Finn thumped his javelin against the tiled floor. Razo smiled at him

and echoed with his own javelin. Enna banged her fist on the table. The sound of two javelins and a fist took up the whole room, lonely and inviting at once. Then a clatter of replies tossed against the walls. The rumble unified, everyone knocking in time, the entire room becoming one drum under one hand. Geric came up behind Isi, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She pressed her head against his hands, and when voices joined the javelins, shouting, “Bayern! Bayern!” her shoulders shook with a sob.

The thumps and shouts pulled at Razo’s skin and clattered against his own heartbeat. He banged his javelin louder, needing to join that noise, inexplicably afraid of being left out.

3

Burning Again

Spring poked out everywhere. Leaf tips jutted from twigs like stuck-out tongues; dark buds and curly ferns elbowed their way into life. Because the party was journeying forward into spring and south into warmth, the plants appeared to erupt around them, quick and desperate. And the pace of the horses, the pace of the world, seemed to keep time with the pounding of the javelins still echoing in Razo's mind.

Razo often rode near the front with Talone, where Enna led the way by listening to the wind. He knew only pieces of how Enna and Isi had gone to the country of Yasid last year and found a way to share their gifts with each other—the speech of wind and fire. Now in addition to being able to pull heat from the air and send it blazing into fire anywhere she chose, Enna possessed Isi's ability to hear the voice of the wind murmur about what it had blown by and even direct it to change its course. Talone liked to have Enna near the front, listening. She often knew in advance if anything unexpected lay ahead—a damaged bridge, a wildcat.

Other times, Razo drifted in the company, lingering in the rear or trotting through the middle where the soldiers and camp workers tangled and produced the merriest talk. The company avoided the topic of Tira and what might await them, perhaps to keep the tension from burying them all alive. In the strained levity, pranks flourished, and Razo knew to shake out his bedroll before climbing in. Knew it now, anyway. Grass snakes were harmless, but could he help it if he yelped like a pup when that cold, scaly body licked across his bare feet?

Often the laughter was strained; often the dinner songs wobbled and caught in throats. Razo knew he was not the only one remembering the foreboding sound of javelins clamoring in the banquet hall and the stillness afterward that had given him pause to imagine war again.

Four weeks into their journey south, Razo woke in the darkest part of night to weeping. The sound of it seemed wrong, like an instrument played out of tune. The stifling feel of a new-moon night, the air-cracking sob, the early-spring chill riding a breeze—all reminded Razo of the birth night of his baby sister. Four years old, he'd awakened to his mother crying in the night and found her curled up and weeping on the ground as the labor pains bore down. He had crouched beside her, crying, too, begging for a way to make it better, until a neighbor had arrived to shoo him outside with his brothers. The next morning, in the joy of a baby girl, everyone seemed to have forgotten the pain; but Razo never forgot.

He crawled out of his bedroll, taking his sword with him in case there was something he could fight to stop the suffering. He did not have to go far.

Enna slept in a small tent near the ambassador's, and Finn slept before the opening. As Razo approached, he could make out Finn's empty bedroll. From inside the tent, he heard their voices.

"It's all right, Enna, tell me." Finn's voice in a whisper. "It helps to tell me."

"I thought I was . . . was there again. . . . Finn, I was there again. . . ." Enna could barely speak through the sobs.

"You were dreaming, dreaming."

"It was that last battle and I . . . was . . . burning . . . and, and, and a man came at me . . . he was on fire. . . ."

"Shh, all right, it's all right."

"No, listen, he was on fire . . . was coming after me . . . because of what I did . . . and it was so real." She paused, trying to catch her breath. "It wasn't real?"

"The battle was almost a year ago," whispered Finn, "and you didn't mean to hurt anyone, you just had to stop the war, remember? The man in your dream isn't real."

"Oh . . ." She hiccuped and slowed her breath, then it tightened again, and before a rush of weeping overtook her she said quickly, "But I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. . . ."

"I know, love, I know. Lean into me, I've got you."

Razo's head and hands felt as heavy as night. There was no enemy he could battle, nothing he could do, so he returned to his bedroll and stared up at the empty places between stars.

In the morning, Finn's uniform was not as tidy as usual and Enna's eyes were red.

"How's it, Razo?" she said, cheerful as ever.

"Morning, Enna-girl," Razo said as he fumbled with a horse blanket. It was no easy task to saddle Bee Sting while the mare was nuzzling his pockets for stowed morsels.

Enna left to put out the breakfast fires. She lit them and put them out each day, a small service she was eager to do whenever camp workers were not watching. Outside Bayern's Own, her identity as the fire-speaker was still a secret.

As soon as Enna was out of earshot, Razo turned to Finn.

"Last night . . . ," he whispered. "That happens often?"

Finn rubbed his eyes. "The last few months, maybe once every week or more. Isi believes Enna will get better with time, as the memories fade. I think Enna needs a chance to use her talents without being destructive." He looked back at Enna leaning over a newly dead fire, then turned and heaved a saddle onto his horse. "It haunts her, Razo, all that she did. I try to sleep near so she needn't wake up alone. In the palace, I used to sneak into her room, sleep beside her."

"Yes, I bet you did," said Razo, elbowing Finn and raising his eyebrows.

Finn looked sharp. "I won't have you thinking that I treat her as a wife when we aren't wed. I sleep beside her to comfort her, that's all. I would never dishonor her."

Razo smirked. "Then you'd better marry her."

"She won't."

"Won't what?" asked Enna, coming upon them.

"Marry me," Finn said with a note of humor.

Enna rolled her eyes. "Is that the only tune you know, piper? Play a different one or I'll take my coin elsewhere. I feel years too young to be having babies."

"Shame," said Razo. "I for one am raring to see what kind of frightening mongrel would be your offspring. Finn's wide shoulders, Enna's black hair, Finn's large hands, Enna's scheming look . . ."

Finn smiled as if he saw the baby in his imagination and thought it beautiful.

The next day, the party crossed Bayern's border and waited for their Tiran escort. Under a shivering sun in a flat landscape, they scratched themselves and played tired pranks so numerous, Talone demanded they cease at once. When the bathing and laundry and shaking off dust peaked from boring to exasperating, Razo escaped into a copse of river trees to hunt.

For Razo, the worst part of journeying was always the bleak, road-weary, stale, and pale food—slosh that was potatoes and meat, somehow; hard little bricks that Conrad tried to convince him were actually bread; disks of salted meat Razo tied to a stick and declared made a mighty fine ax. So Razo's grumbling belly often drove him to hunt for the cookpot. He kept his sling at his hip with a pouch of stones. Some of the soldiers mocked him for wearing a simple Forest weapon so openly, but none protested when he added fresh meat to dinner.

The river beside their camp was spring full, the brushy river trees in heavy leaf, but strangely he could see no squirrels darting about, no fat quail on the bank quivering to hold still. Instead of hunting meat, Razo passed an hour pelting an upright boulder that begged to be a target. When his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten in two entire hours, he picked back up the nicest stones, working his way around the boulder.

Then he saw the body. It was so charred, he could not tell what clothing it had worn, not even if it was a man or a woman. He touched the foot. Cool and hard. It had been there a while.

Suddenly the chirping of insects seemed urgent, warning of something, pleading for Razo to run away. It struck him ridiculous that after the unmitigated slaughter of a battlefield, just one dead body could frighten him motionless, but still he could not move. He imagined his own skin ached, was aware of the heat of his breath on his lips. His gaze was swallowed up in the white wilderness of the river, and he realized now how loud it was, loud enough to drown the sounds of a murderer approaching, rocks crackling underfoot.

Get going, you numbskull. He forced himself up and sauntered away, very casually, just in case anyone was watching. As soon as he left sight of the river, he broke into a run, not slowing until he had fetched Talone.

"Is it Bayern, do you think?" asked Razo as they crouched over the body. With Talone next to him, the insect chatter lost its menace and the tree shadows seemed to take a step back.

“Not from our party. At noon count, no one from our camp was missing, and you say it’s been dead for at least several hours.”

It gave Razo a little thrill that his captain trusted his opinion. “Is there a settlement nearby? Maybe some villager . . .” He examined the area, frowning.

“What?” asked Talone. “You have that look as if your mind is working.”

Razo smirked. “For once, huh? I was just noticing the ground isn’t blackened around it. The body wasn’t burned here, and I hope it didn’t walk here on its own. So why didn’t the murderer dump the body in the river? Or even in that copse? The boulder and trees hide the body from our camp, but we’ve a good look at the road from here. Coming from the other direction, our Tiran escort would’ve spotted this body, no question.”

“So either the murderer was careless or deliberately placed the body so the Tiran would discover it before we did.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it? I mean, if you want to kill a fellow, why not employ a sword? What kind of person murders by burning?”

As soon as Razo spoke the words, he wished he had not. He squatted and fussed with some rocks on the ground as though looking for something very important and not the least concerned.

“Yes, who burns?” Talone’s blue eyes stared at him as if right into his head.

“She wouldn’t. . . .”

“She has before.” Talone’s stoic expression was betrayed by a line of worry in his brow. “I hope not. I hope it was not our Enna.”

Razo was remembering the sounds of weeping in the night. *No, listen, he was on fire . . . was coming after me. . . .* And Finn: *The man in your dream isn’t real. . . .* Could Enna have done this in her sleep and not known? And if so, whom had she burned? But no, Finn lay each night before Enna’s tent. She could not wander away without waking Finn.

Razo looked at the body, his skin squirming. No drag marks, which meant it had been dumped. It would be too heavy for Enna to carry, but not for Finn.

“What are your thoughts?” asked Talone.

“Nothing, I have none,” he said quickly. “I’m just wondering what we do now.”

Talone sighed, and it had a mighty sound to it. “We send the body down the river before the Tiran see it.”

Razo and Talone removed their tunics, wrapping up their hands before lifting the body by ankles and wrists and flinging it into the river. It was frightening to behold how quickly the white torrent grabbed it and pulled it out of sight, how perfectly the water hid all signs of death.

"I hope you make it to the sea," whispered Razo.

Though he was never comfortable with his skinny torso bared, Razo could not make himself put that tunic back on until he could wash off the death touch. He walked back to camp with Talone, his arms crossed over his chest. Wind tickled his skin.

"Don't do anything on your own," said Talone. "Keep your eyes open, and come to me with anything you discover. I'll do whatever needs to be done."

Ahead, Razo saw Enna sitting cross-legged on the ground, jabbering to Finn about something. She was wearing a tunic and skirt dyed dark green, her black braids pinned up to keep her neck free. Razo knew she hated it when her hair touched her neck. She also hated having dry fingertips, music without drums, and potatoes without salt. He knew Enna as well as he knew his own sister and liked her just as well.

Whatever needs to be done.

What would Talone do? Razo whispered a wish that Enna was not burning again.

4

Thousand Years

That evening, the Tiran party made camp across the road. Razo stayed out of the way, bored by all the diplomatic nonsense as Talone and Megina formally greeted Captain Ledel, leader of the Tiran escort, and Lord Kilcad, the Tiran ambassador.

"Look at them, Razo," said Conrad. He was of middling height and lean, his face innocent with freckles, all belying the fact that he was a deadly good grappler. "Don't they look well rested? And bathed, too? Probably moseying along while we killed ourselves to get here on time."

At the word *killed,* Razo could not help glancing at the spot by the river. Puddles of moonlight filled hollows in the river sand.

In the morning, half of the Bayern turned north to accompany the ambassador, Lord Kilcad, into Bayern. Talone's group continued south with Captain Ledel's men, who were there to make certain the Bayern were not harassed while crossing Tira. Or that was the official reason. Razo saw the icy malice in many Tiran soldiers' eyes and thought it would be a miracle if the group could make it to Ingridan without bloodshed.

At night, Razo set up his bedroll near Enna's tent and trained himself to awaken at the least sound. Once he heard her sob at things from her dreams and Finn soothe her back to sleep, but that he could tell, she did not leave her tent.

A morning two weeks from the border, a Bayern camp worker, a girl no more than thirteen years, was pouring water on the breakfast fire when two hulking Tiran passed by. The pot slipped in her hands, splashing water on their boots.

"Trying to get my attention, are you?" said the fiery-haired Tiran. He looked around, as if making certain his captain was not near, then grabbed the girl's wrist and yanked her closer, whispering something in her ear.

“Let off!” The girl struggled, beating her fist against his chest.

“You should be flattered,” said the larger soldier, laughing. “You’re too ugly to deserve the attention.”

Finn was the first one to spring forward. He shoved the Tiran, freeing the girl from his hold, and put himself between them. His hand was on his sword, but he did not draw it yet.

A moment later, Enna was beside him. “Apologize to her, or I’ll teach you manners that’d put your mothers to shame.” The Tiran laughed. “I said apologize, you filthy, fungus-breathed, privy-licking—”

“What did this Bayern call you?” asked the bigger Tiran.

“You heard fine,” Enna said slowly, her glare crackling mad.

The orange-haired Tiran’s voice was like grinding stone. “No Bayern woman insults me.” He pulled a dagger from his boot.

Razo had stayed put until then, leaving the interfering to those more capable, but there was a Tiran with a dagger, and Enna might burn it from his hand and reveal herself as the fire-speaker, or she might do worse.

Razo leaped forward. “Take a deep breath, everybody.” He eased himself between Enna and the Tiran. “Let’s just—”

There was a tweak in Razo’s side as if someone had pinched him. He looked down and saw the hilt of the dagger sticking out of his body.

Sounds and sights and feelings began to twist together, turn upside down: Enna saying, “Razo, Razo”; the larger Tiran running away; the stab-happy lurch just staring at his hand; a breezy pain zipping out of Razo’s middle, tingling all over his body; the air silty as a riverbed in his lungs. He saw the blood, his blood, and just before he fainted, he thought, *Good thing my brothers aren’t here to laugh.*

For a few days, things were murky, though that may have had something to do with the sappy substance the camp cook and surgeon kept shoving between Razo’s lips. The bitter flavor clung to the back of his throat and made everything he ate taste like ashes.

“Will it leave a scar?” Razo asked the cook when he felt well enough to sit up in the back of a wagon.

“Without a doubt,” he said.

“Not in Ingridan yet and already a scar,” said Razo as Enna and Finn rode up beside the wagon. “That doesn’t bode well, I say. And you two’ll be next.”

“We don’t have your luck,” said Finn.

“At least you won’t have to worry anymore about dagger boy,” said Enna. “Captain Ledel relieved him of his rank, weapons, and clothing and left him to starve days from the nearest village. Pretty harsh, I thought, for just tickling you.”

“Ha.”

By the time Razo could ride his horse, Bee Sting, again, the Suneast River had split into a massive delta, forming dozens of smaller rivers, and in the long stretches between their banks, barefoot farmers planted in fields so dark, they oozed greenness. As they rode forward, Ingridan stood up taller and taller on the horizon. All the buildings were white, all the roofs red, and the sameness reminded Razo of an army in uniform or some fluffy, frosted dessert that gushes out of its bowl. He liked the idea of the dessert better.

“Where’s the ocean?” he wondered aloud.

“You cannot see it from this vantage.” A Tiran soldier with hair so pale that it was nearly white rode up beside him. He had removed the blue jacket of his uniform and rolled up his tunic sleeves. Razo wondered if Captain Ledel, who was a terror for order, would notice and reprimand him, but the soldier did not seem worried. He reached out his hand. “I am Victar, third son of Assemblyman Rogis.”

Razo hesitated before shaking his hand. “I’m Razo.” That did not seem like enough. “Sixth son.” Victar appeared to expect more. “Of my ma in the Forest.”

Victar had a pleasant smile. “With so many sons, it’s no wonder you are a professional soldier. I as well may have little to inherit and must earn my own way.”

“Inherit?” Razo laughed. “That word’s too fancy by half. In the Forest, everybody’s just as poor as everyone else.”

“You are very open to admit as much. In the city of rivers, only the dead can close their mouths, so the saying goes. If it crosses my mind, I might reveal what you just said in any tavern or barracks.”

Razo shrugged. “Go ahead, though I don’t know who’d care.”

Victar kept riding beside Razo and appeared disposed to chat, so Razo learned that to be considered for an assembly seat, one must be a noble and have land worth at least four hundred thousand gold fulls (which Razo gathered were a type of coin). When he inquired where Bayern’s Own would be housed in Ingridan, Victar spoke of Thousand Years.

“The prince’s palace. Its full title is the Palace of the Power That Will Stand for One Thousand Years, so named by the prince who built it.”

“And has it?” asked Razo. “Stood for a thousand years?”

“We won’t know for another seven hundred.”

“Victar!” a Tiran soldier called, anger twitching his face. Razo recognized him as the one who had run away from the stabbing. Razo laid his arm across his belly.

Victar lowered his voice and barely moved his lips. “That is Tumas. He was close friends with the disgraced soldier who wounded you, and I heard him rant that it was your fault, that you thrust yourself on the blade on purpose.”

“Ha, that’s lovely. I’d hope I’ve got more sense than that.”

“But a man like Tumas won’t hear reason. He is not an easy foe, Razo. He has many friends and they will try . . . Just, avoid them, if you understand me.”

“Great, already the Tiran want me dead.”

“Not all of us. Good luck, Razo.”

Victar waved farewell as he rode ahead, and Razo waved after him, then felt ashamed, naive, to have been friendly at all. Just a year ago, Victar was someone Razo might have tried to kill in battle. What a strange circumstance, how unsteady it made the road feel. He patted Bee Sting’s neck.

The road spilled into a broad, paved avenue coursing through the center of the city. Half the Tiran soldiers led the way, and the remaining ten brought up the rear, like jailers herding convicts to the gallows. Ingridan citizens eased out of shop doors and leaned from upper windows, arms folded, gazes hot.

They crossed the avenue’s second bridge, this one spanning a river four horses wide. Razo liked the rivers, blue tiles covering their banks, giving them a smooth, clean look.

Every few blocks, crowded tenements and grand palaces pulled out of the way of paved squares. Often there were trees, though nothing like the wild, deep Forest that Razo knew. These trees rose slender from planter boxes, their foliage trimmed round on the bottom and pinched off at the top in the shape of a candle flame. Others wore their greenery in perfect balls and shook glossy leaves and tiny white blossoms, their odor claiming both tangy and sweet flavors at once.

Razo was peering into a courtyard's turquoise-tiled fountain as he rode by when something struck him on the cheek.

"Go home!" A group of boys a few years younger than Razo stood in the square, their hands dripping with soggy pieces of orange fruit. Razo wiped the pulp from his face and flicked it at the back of Enna's hand.

"Ew," she said, shaking it off.

Another fruit whizzed past their heads, making Enna alert. A third might have hit Finn, but a wind blew it curiously off course, and it slammed into the nose of Tumas, the Tiran soldier directly behind them. Enna was careful not to smile, staring to the side with an extremely proper expression.

"Good shot, Enna-girl," Razo whispered.

Tumas cursed at the boys.

"What are you going to do, blue jackets?" One of the boys planted his feet and raised his fists. "You lost us a war, and my fists bet you'll lose a street fight."

Tumas wheeled his horse out of formation and cantered at them. The boys pulled their bolder compatriot into an alley, and Captain Ledel ordered Tumas back.

Razo was not particularly eager to keep the seething soldier as a foe and offered him a friendly grin. "My ma used to soak her hands in fruity water. Maybe it's good for our skin?"

"The first chance I get . . . ," said Tumas in the hollow manner of one always congested. He sniffed and rode ahead without finishing the threat, leaving Razo to imagine.

The avenue merged into a broad crossroads, and at last they caught sight of the palace. It nestled between two rivers, far behind iron gates, and proclaimed its magnificence not with towers or banners, but simply by its immensity. Razo counted four stories, forty-four front-facing windows per story, and guessing there were two other wings with a large courtyard in the center . . . he calculated in his head, a trick Talone had taught him for estimating enemy troops from the number of wagons or tents.

"How big?" asked Finn.

"Averaging three windows per room," said Razo, "I would guess over five hundred rooms in the main structure, not including outbuildings, barracks . . ."

"That's too big," said Enna.

“. . . stables, gardens and gardener shacks, separate servant quarters, and I’d guess a dairy, animal workers, a mill, all self-sustaining—”

“What do you do with five hundred rooms?”

“It’d only make sense in a siege, though those gates aren’t built for sieges, only really useful for keeping out the riffraff.”

“Bayern’s capital was made for defense,” said Finn, “but Ingridan assumes it’ll be doing the attacking.”

Razo slowed Bee Sting as they neared the gates. “Once we’re inside, d’you think they’ll just . . . ?”He ran his thumb across his throat.

“They can kill us just as easily in the street,” said Finn.

“Let ’em try,” said Enna. “I’ll gut their city first.”

That thought did not comfort Razo much.

The group halted beside a stable as several Tiran emerged from the palace. They wore tunics with a skirt, or leggings for the men, and a swath of loose fabric wrapped around their chests and over their shoulders, all the cloth white, pale blue, or peach. Used to the vibrancy of Bayern dyes, Razo thought the lack of color indescribably boring.

A man in a white robe introduced himself as Lord Bel-van, head of forces at Thousand Years. He wore his graying hair slicked back, which drew more attention to his beak nose but also gave him an open, honest aspect.

“I hope to see this arrangement work, Lady Megina,” he said. “We lost many good people in that conflict. Let us bury our dead and keep living.”

Razo wondered why the prince was not there to talk about peace. Surely Isi and Geric would be the first to welcome the Tiran ambassador at the Bayern palace gates. Razo shrugged internally. His ma always said that fancy folk were as peculiar as pig bladder balloons and not quite as fun.

A flicker of orange color teased Razo’s attention.

“May I introduce Lady Dasha,” Lord Belvan said, indicating a girl of about sixteen years. “Her father, Lord Kilcad, is Tira’s ambassador to Bayern, and while he sojourns in your country, she has agreed to stay at Thousand Years and act as liaison to your people.”

She had orange hair. Razo had never seen anyone with that hair color except that swine who’d stabbed him on the journey, and the swine had not been nearly so pleasant to look at. She was wearing a pale peach cloth wrapped around her dress, and her legs were bare at her ankles but for the leather straps of her sandals. If Lord Belvan said anything else, Razo did not hear it—he was completely mystified, or embarrassed, or perhaps

enthralled, by those ankles. He had never seen a girl in public with naked ankles before. Now he wondered why. Were ankles bad? Those ankles did not look bad. A mite bony, perhaps, but ultimately intriguing.

He twisted to swat at a fly and found Tumas staring at him, though in a much more uncomfortable manner than he'd been looking at the girl's ankles. He nudged his mount a little closer to Enna and Finn.

A bath and change of clothes later, Razo sat at the welcoming banquet, trolling his fork through his plate, hunting for something appetizing. Everything was fish. Even the leeks and onions were steeped in fish sauce that was thickened with honey until it was cruelly sweet. He bit into a purple vegetable so sour that it made him suck in his cheeks. The thought of home felt emptier than his stomach.

And to irritate him further, there were no chairs. Apparently it was Tiran fashion to lounge on pillows at a banquet table and eat with one hand, but Razo did not lounge so much as sprawl. Finn slouched. Enna sulked.

As soon as they could get away, Razo and Finn sneaked with Enna to her chamber in the palace. Though the rugs and bedclothes were made in drab, unhappy colors, Razo still thought it much more comfy than the barracks where he and Finn were housed. Razo had spent years under one roof with five snoring brothers and was not eager to relive the experience.

"It's a strange city, no mistake," said Razo the fourth night he and Finn camped out on Enna's floor. "In Bayern, it feels like the city wall was built to keep the Forest from marching back in, but Ingridan forgot there was ever anything but city. The only bits of dirt I've seen are the fighting circles near each barracks. Still, you've got to admit that paving everything keeps it clean—"

"I don't have to admit anything," said Enna.

Razo sighed. In the past, Enna had been treated vilely by a Tiran man and apparently still had not healed from it. Razo could not help wondering if that old hurt might not provoke her to do stupid things. To change the subject, he brought out a dry plum cake he had swiped from the dining hall. When Enna pestered him to fetch some milk to wash it down, he threw a pillow at her face.

"I brought the cake! Why don't you or Finn go?"

"Because sometimes Finn and I want to be alone."

"Oh, I see, you two become all lovey and then Razo's left in the cold." Razo meant his tone to be playful, but it was not quite.

“I don’t want any milk—” Finn started.

“It’s fine, never mind.” Razo dragged himself off the floor, opened Enna’s door, and bumped right into Lady Dasha of the orange hair and pleasant ankles.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said, “I was looking for the ambassador.”

“Wrong door,” said Razo. “Lady Megina’s one room down.”

The girl turned away without meeting his eyes. Razo left in the opposite direction and peered back once. She had passed Megina’s apartments and continued on.

5

What Goes On Out There

Razo's stomach was squeaking, his intestines knotted and shivering—the Tiran food made his gut as sore as his heart felt when he thought of his ma and Rin and the Forest. He left off keeping an eye on Enna for the first time in a week to report for sword practice and found himself still holding on to a tangerine peel left over from lunch, just to look at some color. Everything else on the palace grounds was so muted—white clothes, white stones.

"You going to play?" asked a sharp-jawed soldier named Veran.

"Oh, yes, sorry." Razo dropped the peel so he could pick up a practice sword. The orange against the pale dirt was as vibrant as the sound of thunder.

After an afternoon of bashing wooden swords with Bayern's Own, and with dinner still hours away, Razo went hunting for a crumb of something familiar lest he cave in on himself. He was wandering near the dining hall when he discovered a passage filled with affable smells.

That could lead to lower kitchens. Or to death, he thought dramatically, then discovered that playing mock terror did not help him shake off the real dread much. He wished Finn and Enna were with him, but he supposed they wanted to be *alone.* Besides, they most likely would not agree to do something as stupid as enter the bowels of the Tiran palace just hours after Lord Belvan had warned about whispered threats to Bayern lives.

Don't be stupid, Razo warned himself. *Taking risks earns you scars, and the next could be the one that ends you.* But Talone had chosen him, and his brain was sore from trying to imagine how he could ever prove his captain had not made a mistake. Besides, how were they ever to make friendly with the people of this country like Isi wanted if they were always locked up and afraid to say "hello there"?

So to disguise the extremely minor tremble in his hands, Razo sauntered in with his hands in his pockets, whistling through the space between his front teeth. (He'd always liked the space, believing that it gave him a roguish appeal.) Several voices gasped at once.

No windows peered into this kitchen with its yellow bricks stained smoke black, squat ceiling, and sulking fires. Nearly half the eyes watching Razo were glittering with glares. Razo shifted his feet.

"You're a Bayern." A freckled serving girl gaped, a smear of something fluffy across her cheek.

"I am?" Razo took the metal spoon from her hand and looked at himself in its silvery bowl. "Nah, I couldn't be. Bayern aren't this good-looking."

She giggled.

He kept the spoon and took over whipping a bowl of cream. Other girls neared, cautiously, like birds toward fallen crumbs. He thought of Isi saying, *It's easy to believe complete strangers are your enemies. If they knew us* . . . He smiled and did his best to exude harmlessness. Several girls stayed working in their corners, their looks as dark as soot stains, but others began to question him.

"So what is Bayern really like?"

"I heard your babies are not born properly but crawl out of the earth."

"Did you bring your fire-breathing horses?"

"Do the Bayern really eat Tiran babies?"

"Where are your horns and tail?"

Razo was sorely tempted to assert that all was true and he'd lost his horns and tail in a tragic childhood accident, but he bit his tongue.

When offered bits of misshapen cakes (he was delighted to discover he'd found the pastry kitchen), he regaled the dough girls and tray girls with details of wintermoon festival, Isi and Geric's wedding, the deeps of the Forest, the muddled pranks he and Enna battled during their animal keeper days, anything of interest that weighed his tongue.

The pastry chef had huge knobs for knuckles, reminding Razo of his own mother who worked too hard. When he dried dishes for her, the chef peeled him a tangerine.

"My first day here," said Razo, "a boy chucked one of these at my face. So how come you don't hate me for being Bayern?"

"The war was none of my business," said the pastry chef. "I've still got blisters on my heels and spasms in my back. What goes on out there doesn't

change much down here."

One of the girls in the corner sharpened a knife emphatically, and Razo did not need the chill zipping down his back to know that not all the girls agreed with the pastry chef.

Leaving the kitchens a couple of hours later, Razo played with the skip in his step, his tongue lingering on the sharp, cold flavor of tangerine. His belly was full of cake and fruit, and he was feeling halfway to peace with Tira when a howl ripped the evening air.

Razo was running toward the sound before thinking twice. Others were running, too, soldiers and sentries, all drawn to the noise of death. The movement slammed to a stop at the Bayern barracks, where Brynn, Talone's second-man, was standing with drawn sword over the body of a Tiran. Blood stained half the blade. Slumped behind him lay Veran, one of Bayern's Own, motionless, blood pooling on the pale stones.

Then shouting. So much noise, Razo could not hear words. The Bayern drew their swords, their backs against the barracks. A mob of Tiran soldiers separated Razo from his countrymen. He cursed himself for leaving his sword at the practice ground and stayed as still as his pounding heart would allow.

Don't notice me, don't notice, he thought, wincing away from the screaming Tiran all around him and for once blessing his unobtrusive stature. He wished for Enna and Finn, then undid that wish with a crossing of fingers. If Enna were there, she might have to burn.

"I said, silence!" Lord Belvan was pushing through the crowd, Talone in his wake.

"What happened, Brynn?" asked Talone.

Brynn's voice was hot, scratched with anger and grief. "That man"—he pointed to the splayed body of the Tiran—"broke into the barracks, shouting, 'Long live His Radiance,' calling for the Bayern ambassador to face him. Veran"—his voice softened on the name, and he gestured to his lifeless comrade—"came forward to reason with him, pulled him outside, said the ambassador wasn't in the barracks. The Tiran screamed, ran his weapon through Veran, and swung at me. I got my sword into the murderer before he could swing a third time."

Shouting again. Curses, weapons raised, shouts of, "Liar! He lies! Kill them!" A Tiran worker had noticed Razo. He elbowed the soldier beside him, pointing. Razo gripped his sling and started to back away.

“Were there any observers?” Belvan shouted, his impressive nose pointed at the crowd. “Any besides the Bayern?”

Please let there be Tiran witnesses. Razo wiped sweat from his forehead. Four Tiran grounds workers were glaring at him, hands hovering over the hilts of daggers. A soldier stood at his back, blocking his escape.

“I saw it, Lord Belvan.” A sentry dragged himself forward, then yanked another by the arm. “And so did Weno here. It happened as the Bayern fellow said.”

Mournful calls of doubt replaced the shouting, but the witnesses stood firm.

“Thank you for your courage,” said Belvan. “I declare no harm done by this Bayern man but in self-defense and order this crowd dispersed.”

Razo saluted his new Tiran acquaintances. They glanced at Belvan as they released weapons and stepped back, giving Razo space to tear through the crowd and into the barracks, joining the rest of the Own.

“He wasn’t a soldier,” one of Belvan’s men was saying. “I don’t know who he was, my lord. His clothes are fine, but he has no mark of identification on him, just a copper ring.”

“Thank you,” said Belvan. He turned to Talone with an exhausted expression. “This is a disaster, Captain. I had thought keeping to the grounds would protect you from any armed groups bent on murder, but we met with a fool willing to sneak in and attack on his own. I cannot guarantee Thousand Years safe from more slippery little fellows like this one.”

“We will not be moved,” said Megina, arriving, her face full of the fresh news. “We must show that we’re here to stay, that despite such threats we trust the Tiran people with our safety.”

Enna and Finn trailed her, and Razo saw Enna take in the sight of Veran. He knew her thoughts—if she’d been there, she might have saved him. Then again, Razo thought, she might have not only revealed herself as the fire-speaker, but broken her promise and killed again.

“As you wish, Lady Megina,” said Belvan. “But to ease my own mind, I will transfer Captain Ledel’s company to the barracks beside yours. Their presence should help deter future attacks.”

Lord Belvan did not seem to notice how that news failed to buoy the Bayerns’ spirits.

Through the window, Razo saw sentries carrying Veran's body away. Two dead. Razo's throat was too stiff to swallow, and he spat at the ground and closed his eyes. Sliding behind his lids was a memory of the war—the Battle of Ostekin Fields, dead too numerous to bury, bodies stacked together and set aflame. One face in twenty had been a friend.

6

The Second Corpse

Razo returned to the pastry kitchen two days later, when the haunting feeling of men slain had started to lift. The mystery behind Veran's attacker had irked him in his sleep, and he had an inkling that the best and truest gossip trickled down to the lowest kitchens.

"Was he a friend of yours?" asked the pastry chef.

"I knew him well enough and liked him, too. Lord Belvan and his men are running around with eyes closed, trying to figure out who it was and if there're more like him, but I told myself, if anyone has any ideas, it'd be the pastry girls."

The freckled girl laughed high and staccato like a marsh bird. "This city's secrets are like a farmer's animals—not a one but will one day end up in the kitchen!"

A few girls volunteered this idea and that, all nonsense, until a usually quiet girl with smooth yellow hair looked up from the washing.

"Any of you heard of Manifest Tira?"

"That a city out east?" asked another.

"It's some group who wants the war back again. My cousin's a part of it. He's war hungry because he didn't get a chance to fight, but I gather the leaders of the group think Tira's destiny is to own Bayern and everything else." She shrugged. "You should watch out for them, Razo. Last time I was at my mother's house in the city, I ran into some of my cousin's new friends, the sort who would skin a cat squealing if they thought it the patriotic thing to do."

Razo stuck his hands in the suds to wash trays beside her. "Do you know who they are or where they meet? Maybe I should warn Lord Belvan."

The girl's eyes widened. "Do that, and I could be their next cat."

"Then I won't say a word about you. I promise."

The girl looked ready to scurry under a table, so he cleared his throat and tried to change topics to something harmless—how wretched his Bayern wool clothing was in the bursting spring. The freckled girl claimed to know the palace thread-mistress, another worked as a morning maid for Lady Dasha, and within hours he had permission for new clothes and an appointment for a fitting.

That night as he entered Enna's room, he felt as splendid as one of the peacocks in the palace garden.

"What on earth are you wearing?" Enna's face scrunched as though she smelled something foul.

Razo raised his hand as if requesting silence. "I'm pretty sure I can guess your opinion of my new wardrobe, but nothing you say'll make me toss it. What we need in all this gloom after Veran's death is a bit of Bayern and Tira playing together nice, that's all I'm saying."

The thread-mistress had made him loose-fitting leggings and a white tunic. The chest cloth most Tiran wrapped around themselves was called a "lummas," and Razo discovered it had some practical purposes, such as wiping sweat or pulling onto his head for shade. Instead of a sash he tied his distance sling around his waist, and he kept his same boots. It was a curious blend of both countries' styles, and he thought it quite natty. He wished only that he could get his hands on the Bayern dyes brought for trading. His eye missed bright colors.

"You look ridiculous . . . ," Enna started.

Razo raised his hand again. "That's not what the girls in the pastry kitchen say."

"Really?" Finn grinned.

Razo laughed suggestively. "Indeed. Well, some I'd give a wide berth while they're sharpening a chopping knife, but others . . . let's just say that my fingers and toes can't keep track of all the winking. Too bad I can't go out in the city tonight and show off my new goods."

Ingridan was celebrating one of its feast days, which the pastry chef claimed were as common as raisins in a raisin bun. Some of the girls had invited Razo to join them in the streets, draped in flowers and dancing until the moon was high, but Megina had judged it too dangerous yet.

How are we ever going to make them our friends, Razo wondered, *if we can't run out into the streets and dance?*

“I’m sure we’re not missing much,” said Enna, but Razo thought she sounded sorry not to swathe herself in flowers.

The door burst open. Razo flung himself behind a table while scrabbling for his sword. It was only Megina, and Enna laughed at him.

“A bit jumpy, are we?” said Enna.

“You can poke fun when Tumas and all his friends want *you* dead.”

Megina shut the door behind her. “Unbelievable. A maid mentioned she thought two boys were sleeping in my waiting woman’s room, and here you are, bedrolls on the carpet as if setting up a war camp. How does it look for my waiting woman to have boys sleeping by her bed?”

“Lady Megina,” said Enna, “I’m not really your waiting woman—”

“I know that, but it matters what *they* think. We can’t give the Tiran any cause to doubt our character. You two, join the others in the barracks.”

Finn argued silently with a firm stance, but Razo gathered both their bedrolls, put a hand on Finn’s back, and led him from the room.

“We’ll appeal to Talone tomorrow,” said Razo. “He’s likely to oppose anything Megina says, as they’re not exactly grand pals, and besides, I think he’ll see good reason to keep someone near Enna.”

Finn did not ask why. It made Razo wonder how much he knew.

The snores of the barracks shoved and rattled Razo all night, and on top of that, those crazy Tiran were always ringing bells to tell the hour, as if time were more important than sleep. The twentieth instance he woke, Razo decided to just get up.

The moon slumped low and fat on the horizon. He had been trying so hard to sleep, his body still felt heavy and worried with the idea, and he stumbled on the paving stones and tilted to one side. The sentries he passed frowned at the Bayern sun and crown on his cloak, and Razo felt a warning throb in his side where Tumas’s friend had notched him. But he was tired and awake, an unhappy combination, so he decided to ignore his mild dread and practice his sling on the training ground until dawn kicked the day awake.

Besides, Captain Ledel’s men are near, so I’m safe, he thought, just to tell himself a good joke.

The night was full of contrast—warm air tingling with a cold chill, dark sky and a bright moon, his sleepy eyes and alert mind. The trees and buildings sloughed their heavy shadows on the dirt, and Razo pushed

through them as through a shallow stream, until his boot struck something solid.

One shadow was not shadow. He tapped it with his toe and heard the crackle of burnt cloth. That sour smell gushed down his throat.

Razo looked south, to the dark spot that was Enna's window, and wished for a river at hand.

7

Secret Burial

All the shadows seemed to shift as if the moon were plunging across the sky. The dark parts of the sky leaned lower, and the chill in the air crept closer in, fingering the hairs on Razo's arms and neck. The punching of his heartbeat made him feel knocked about, exposed. Not alone.

Razo flipped around. No one there but a dead body. He could hear his own breathing.

Think, Razo told himself. *You're here, so be useful.*

Again, there were no drag marks on the dirt. Someone must have lifted the body and dumped it. Someone large. Razo knew he himself would not be strong enough to carry it alone. The sound of footsteps in the distance slapped his heartbeat faster. He could drag the body to the Pallo, the palace's slender river. Of course, it cut through the gardens on the other side of the barracks, and he would pass a dozen sentries before reaching it.

He wished down into his gut that he could figure out what to do on his own, that he would not have to go running for his captain.

Think. Razo. Think for once, Forest-born. No solution tickled his brain. He flung his cloak over the body before dashing back to the barracks.

Razo inched through the door of the captain's private apartment and crouched before the bed. A tree outside the room's only window crowded out the moonlight, and Razo could not see. He waited two breaths.

"What is it, Razo?" Talone asked in a voice cracked with sleep.

"Another body, Captain. Behind the training grounds. So far as I know, no one's spotted it but me."

A pause.

"Get a shovel from my back room while I put on my boots."

They dragged the body closer to the barracks, behind two potted trees. Razo left to keep a watch on the path, and the sounds of Talone's digging

disrupted the night.

"Lovely," Razo whispered as he began to fling stones against the trunk of a far tree. His skin itched with sweat, his neck hurt to be twisting around constantly as he searched for any onlookers. A sentry neared, and Razo swallowed an exclamation, producing a "haaagh" sound in his throat. It kind of hurt. To warn Talone of the sentry, he changed targets from the tree to a post near where Talone dug. *Whack,* his stone lashed the post, and the sounds of a shovel scraping earth paused.

"Morning," Razo said pleasantly, still slinging at the post. "Couldn't sleep, you know? Just practicing my, uh, sling. Here."

The sentry glared as he continued by. Razo held his breath until he was out of sight. Then he sent a stone back at the tree. The digging resumed.

Another sentry passed, and then a third. Razo felt as though he had run up a mountain, his heart speeding, his whole body sore. At last the scraping sounds stopped altogether, so Razo gathered his shot and returned to Talone's room. The captain entered a few minutes later. Dirt rode up his elbows, covered his boots, smudged his beard. He sat on the edge of his cot and leaned his brow against his hands.

"It's fortunate that it rained yesterday. The ground was soft."

Razo slumped onto the floor. "Finn and I were sleeping in her room, all but last night. Lady Megina told us to leave. If I'd stayed . . ."

Talone shook his head, saying it was fruitless to question it.

"Do you think it was her?" asked Razo.

"If the Tiran find burned bodies after our arrival, they'll be convinced we're harboring a 'fire-witch,' as they say, whether or not our Enna is responsible. In sketchy diplomatic situations, the truth matters less than what the other side *thinks* is the truth."

"Lady Megina said as much to me last night."

"Did she?" Talone filled a cup with water and set it on the ground beside Razo. "It's time to tell me everything you know about Enna's burnings."

Razo had been avoiding this very conversation since the end of the war. He squirmed as he spoke, uncomfortable now on the hard floor. "It's been about a year and a half since I first figured Enna had something to do with the reports of random burnings in Tiran camps. When I confronted her about it, she seemed almost relieved to have someone to tell, as well as eager to do more with the fire."

Razo dipped a finger in the water, shook it off. “It was her idea to go on scouting missions with me into the Bayern towns the Tiran had taken, burn tents and stacks of weapons and such. She was aware that her control over the fire slipped sometimes, so she wanted someone to make sure she didn’t go too far. After our first burning raid, I brought Finn along, too, but she was already falling fast. When Finn and I realized, we refused to go with her until she was clearheaded. That night she ran off without us to Eylbold, got herself caught by that nasty Tiran captain, and spent a couple of months prisoner. I don’t know what-all happened there.”

Talone was changing his clothes, washing his hands and face, ridding himself of the residue of grave digging. Razo watched, realizing that whether or not Enna was burning, he and Talone were now elbow deep in these murders. If any Tiran had seen them, if they were found out . . . Razo rubbed his back against the wall. Cold chills always made him feel itchy.

“Finn and I tried to rescue her, as you know.” Razo cleared his throat casually. No need to dwell too long on that point. By rights, Talone could have seized their javelins and all rights as soldiers for deserting the army. It had hurt Razo as much as any of his wounds to betray Talone like that. “Captain, you know the rest, how Enna burned our way free and we caught up with the Tiran army before they invaded the capital.”

Talone wiped a smear of soot from his boot. “Tell me about Enna during that last battle.”

Razo decided he wanted that water now and drank the entire cup without a breath. The cold tingled his empty stomach as though he had swallowed honeybees.

“It was ugly, Captain. It was the worst thing I ever saw, and whenever I find those images in my skull, I kick them out again with a swift boot.”

“Go on, son.”

At the word *son,* Razo sat up a little taller.

“Well, Finn and I, we stood in front of Enna and fought any Tiran who tried to stop her. They’d started to catch fire, whole groups of them. I tried not to watch, but I could hear them scream. When I . . . when I turned back once to look at Enna, she was lying on her stomach, holding herself up on her elbows. She sobbed, but her face was smooth, as if she didn’t know she was crying. She just stared at the field, at the burning men.”

Razo scratched his face with both hands. “Times I saw her set fire to tents and things, and I could tell she enjoyed it, but that dead expression . . .

I didn't look back again. Before long, some Tiran villain got a sword between my ribs and I didn't see her again for months, not until she and Isi had returned from their trip south."

"Do you know what happened there?" asked Talone.

"Finn told me that in Yasid, Isi was able to teach Enna wind speech and Enna taught Isi fire, so now they both have both talents, and somehow that made Enna better."

Talone did not even blink, and what he did not say seemed to hang above Razo's head. *Is she better?*

"What do you think?" asked Talone.

"I don't think much, Captain. You know that."

Talone did not laugh. Razo wondered if that meant he agreed, if he did think Razo was as witless as a startled hare. Razo slumped. "I hope it isn't Enna."

"We need to be sure."

"You want me to keep sleeping in her room?"

Talone shook his head. "Megina is right. And Enna's safety relies on the fact that no one knows who she is. If we look like we're protecting her . . . No, it's better to watch her from afar."

"Finn'll go back," said Razo.

"I know."

What if he's carrying off the bodies she burns? Razo wanted to ask.

A knock jumped Razo to his feet, javelin in hand. Talone opened the door, his face as emotionless as ever.

"Good morning, Captain Talone."

Captain Ledel's hair was a dirty yellow, tied back at his thick neck, the tip flung over one of his warrior shoulders. His eyes looked tired, but he smiled pleasantly into the impressive scar that ran down his jawline. Razo generally approved of facial scars. Sadly, all his own battle marks were on his torso where girls could not easily catch sight of them.

"You are occupied, Captain?" Ledel asked, looking at Razo. He had a peculiar rasp to his voice that made Razo wonder if he had been up all night.

"One of my soldiers is here to receive his daily orders," said Talone.

Ledel nodded once, an approving gesture. "You are an early riser. I always say, a captain should never sleep."

"Not when anyone is looking," said Talone.

“I hope you will postpone any engagements this morning. The men need amusement, and tension often yields under the power of some friendly bashing. What do you say to mock combats at the training grounds?”

Talone barely hesitated before nodding. “I’ll wake my men.”

“Good. It’s natural for recent rivals to feel animosity. We are all military men, and the war is fresh in our ears, but I won’t tolerate disorderly violence. There is nothing I despise so much as professionals in the art of war who think they can stomp upon its rules.”

Ledel spoke with a trembling earnestness that raised goose bumps on Razo’s skin. Why was Ledel so desperate to assert his fervor for following the rules of war? It made Razo wonder.

8

The Own's Worst Swordsman

Ledel's men were waiting on the patch of uncovered soil between the two barracks, still bleary-eyed and wincing at the sharp disk of the sun. The morning light exposed every scar on their faces as well as every heap and dip in the dirt. Razo fiercely, desperately avoided looking at the spot where the body was buried.

Ledel tossed two wooden swords into the fighting ring, matched the first pair, and combat began. Razo squirmed as he watched, thinking of eleven different ways a wooden sword could kill. When one soldier managed to touch his opponent anywhere between waist and neck, one of the captains would call out, "Match, for Tira," or, "Match, Bayern."

A couple of rounds into the exercise, Razo caught sight of Ledel muttering to his secondman, his jaw scar looking pink and raw and his manner intense. Razo shadowed them in time to hear, ". . . we'll see how well they perform as soldiers without the fire fighting for them. If only they do not . . ."

Razo kept walking and joined Finn.

"Do you get the feeling they're just waiting for the chance to poke out someone's eyeball?" Razo whispered under the din of clacking swords.

Finn nodded. "Everything about this feels like the war, only without the killing."

"So far." Razo looked for Tumas and squinted against the morning sun, his eyes tearing. "That big brute of theirs, every time he looks at me, I get the crawly sensation that he's spittin' eager for the chance to slice me pigwise."

"Tumas," Ledel called the soldier into the ring.

Razo snorted. "There he goes. I wonder what poor sap Talone'll call to face—"

“Razo,” said Talone.

Razo gaped—at Tumas leering in the ring, at the other soldiers staring at him, at his captain, who was sending him against an opponent who wanted him dead, or at least wounded as painfully as possible. He wondered if it would be worse to run away now or lose an eye to Tumas’s wooden sword.

Finn grabbed Razo’s arm and whispered, “What’s the captain thinking? You can’t do it.”

At that, Razo shook off Finn’s hand and strode into the ring, taking position on the large shadow of Tumas’s head that the sun dropped before him. The man was tall and impressively imposing in every way but his large, flabby ears, which reminded Razo of nothing so much as a pair of pork chops. Tumas grinned, and Razo felt his side throb where the soldier’s friend had carved a scar. *I can do this, I can.*

“Begin!” Ledel shouted.

Tumas moved. Razo swung. He felt a jab in his gut.

“Match, for Tira,” said Ledel.

Razo fell to one knee, pushing against the pain in his ribs, and stayed down. No blood. He would be all right when the sharpness ebbed, but the Tiran soldiers were laughing, and Razo did not want to look up and see a flicker of shame in the faces of his comrades.

You’ve still got both your eyeballs, Razo thought with hopeful cheer. He grabbed for a breath and scooted out of the ring, feeling as though he dragged a very heavy shadow behind him.

“Come, I was expecting some sport!” Tumas’s voice squealed through his congested nose. “This is a child. I demand another turn.”

“You demand nothing, soldier,” said Ledel. “Stand properly.”

Tumas straightened. “Yes, Captain.”

Ledel turned to Talone. “What say you? Shall we see if any of your boys can beat our Tumas?”

“Fair enough,” said Talone. “Finn.”

Tumas noticed the smiles of the Bayern soldiers that indicated this opponent was different, and his expression stiffened. The two challengers faced each other, sword tips resting on the ground in ready position. Then, without warning, Tumas pounced.

The first move Finn made was to step aside. And the second. And the third. Tumas’s lower lip began to twitch.

Razo had watched Finn fight a thousand times, in practice and in wartime. What never ceased to catch his breath was Finn's expression of acceptance, almost of surrender. He wasted nothing, letting every motion matter. And although Razo was just leaning against the barracks wall, watching Finn made him feel as though even he himself mattered. He watched with energy, muscles taut, face aching, as tired as if he were the one fighting.

Tumas's swipes began to have a vicious slice to them, seeking not just to touch Finn, but to bruise something, rip something. Then he hit Finn's sword, and Finn was not able to bounce the strike away. They faced each other, weapons crossed. Finn opened his mouth to breathe. Tumas spat in his face. Ledel shouted Tumas's name in disapproval but did not stop the match, and that quickly, the myth of a friendly bout evaporated. Shouts exploded from both sides.

Razo had run to the edge of the fighting circle without realizing it. Right here, he realized, the war could start again.

Tumas pushed off and attacked again, harassing Finn with strikes on his sword that would ache in Finn's arm tomorrow. Then Razo saw the opening, just before it happened. Finn was drawing Tumas closer, getting him comfortable in his attacking, letting him fall into a routine of strike, strike, strike—then gently, almost like a step in a dance, Finn lowered his sword and moved his inside foot back. Tumas stumbled. Finn turned and tapped his sword on the Tiran's back, lightly, as though he were getting a stranger's attention.

"Match," said Talone. "Bayern."

Tumas's chest heaved. A drop of sweat fell into his eye, but he did not blink. "I'm not fresh. If I had been fresh, the outcome would be different."

"Perhaps you're right." Finn put out his hand to shake. Tumas's face contorted. He pulled his arm back and swung.

"Watch it!" Razo shouted, but Finn had anticipated Tumas's fist and leaned away. Ledel and others rushed forward to grab Tumas, who was cursing and shouting. Other Tiran joined the uproar, shoving Bayern soldiers in the chest, waiting for someone to draw first blood, for that permission to fight. Shouting from both sides now, muscles tensed, hands in fists. The moment spun around and around, and Razo felt twisted and backward, his eyes murky with the memory of a battlefield, men plunging swords through bodies, blood on his clothes that was not his own, killing

and wondering why, expecting pain, anticipating dying, questioning if he were already dead . . .

"Enough!" shouted Ledel.

The Tiran soldiers quieted at the bark of their commander, a touch of fear evident in their obedience. Tumas seemed to tremble with the desire to keep hitting but pulled his arms to his sides. Razo breathed for the first time since Tumas had swung at Finn.

When Talone spoke, his tone was civil, calling no attention to the Tirans' bad behavior. "Thank you for this exercise, Captain Ledel. I hope we may meet here again."

And Ledel made no apology, not as though he did not care, Razo thought, but more that the quick chaos he'd witnessed so offended him that he could not even admit it had happened.

"Indeed. Good day."

Razo noticed Enna standing on the path, watching. Finn saw her, and his entire demeanor changed. Razo tried to determine if he had stood up a little straighter or stuck out his chin or chest, but he could not figure any one thing.

"Well fought, Forest boy," said Enna, approaching.

Finn shrugged. "It was just an exercise."

"You exercised him quite nicely, I thought."

"Does that mean you'll marry me?"

Enna laughed.

The way they seemed wholly absorbed in each other made Razo certain they wanted to be alone, so of course he hustled his way over. Tumas and another soldier passed by Razo so close that they pushed him between their shoulders and dragged him along a few steps.

"Why ith thith one here?" asked Tumas's friend with a lisp so severe, it seemed feigned.

"He's their errand boy," said Tumas. "What a good joke to give him a sword."

Razo writhed, wanting out, too ashamed to shout for help, when Ledel growled for Tumas to come.

Tumas lifted Razo by the arm, bringing his ear to the soldier's mouth. "You're not safe," he whispered before dropping him.

Razo ran behind the barracks. He shoved his sword into its sheath and clenched his javelin, wanting his weapons in hand, just to feel them. He

realized he was standing on the secret grave, and he edged away.

Enna and Finn had disappeared. The rest of Bayern's Own were heading out to find breakfast. Conrad called to Razo to join them, but Razo pretended to be too far away to hear.

Again and again, he wondered, *Why* is *this one here?*

9

Tree Rat

The third afternoon after the match, Razo, Enna, and Finn rambled through the palace gardens, speaking longingly of Bayern potatoes, almond cakes, and venison stew and feeling caged inside the iron fence like animals in a traveling menagerie. They had been in Ingridan for three weeks with little to show for it. And now, only days before the assembly adjourned for the summer, Razo could not help feeling that the mission was failing. But they did not speak about the mission; they talked about potatoes.

When Finn left to take his turn for Megina guard duty, Enna sprinted in the opposite direction, mumbling a quick farewell.

"Slippery girl," said Razo, racing after her. He thought he saw her black hair entering the Bayern stable, so he made his way around the far side. A row of potted trees lined one wall, and he walked inside them, listening through the stable windows for anything out of the ordinary among the wheeze, nicker, and whuffle of horses.

He had come to the end when he saw that girl again, the Tiran ambassador's daughter, pressing her back to the stable as if she did not want to be seen. She brought her cupped palm to her mouth and drank from it. There was a bucket of water on the ground, and Razo supposed she had dipped her hand in it, though he had not seen her do it. She turned and startled when she saw him.

"Oh, hello," she said.

"Hello. I bump into you again." Razo eased out, hoping that he made creeping behind potted trees look as normal as dipping bread in gravy.

She picked a leaf out of his hair. "Yes, that's because I was . . . looking for you."

"Here I am." He tugged casually on his hair to make sure it stood up properly.

“My name is Dasha.” By way of greeting, she crossed her wrists on her chest and inclined her head.

“Uh, Razo.” He tried to do the nod-and-hands thing, too, though he must have done it awkwardly, for she smiled.

Her smile was peculiar—it made her nose wrinkle, not as though she smelled something unpleasant, but more that she was so amused, her whole face wanted to be a part of the smile. It affected him strangely, and he stared at her longer than was probably polite. Her hair was not so much orange as the color of rust on iron, and her eyes were blue like the tiled fountains in the public squares. Though she was of his height, she was such a skinny thing, he could probably fling her over a shoulder. He was contemplating this appealing notion when he realized she had spoken.

“What was that?”

“I said, I am the liaison to the Bayern at Thousand Years, if you require anything.”

“Ah,” seemed like an appropriate response.

Her mouth twisted in a half smile. “*Do* you require anything?”

“Oh, you’re asking me. No, not really. Well, except the ocean.”

“You want the ocean?”

“Yes, fetch it for me!”

She blinked, and Razo laughed. “No, you nit, I don’t want the ocean. I just want to see it. Everyone was going on about seeing an ocean, and here I’ve been in Ingridan for almost three weeks and not a peep. But I know we’re not supposed to leave the palace, so I guess I’m out of luck.”

She stared at him, as though mentioning the ocean were as insulting as showing his bum to the world.

“What?” he said.

“You called me a nit.”

“Oh. I did! And I hardly know you. I mean, I’m sorry.”

She laughed and tugged on his sleeve. The touch made him want to stand on his toes to be taller.

“You can call me a nit anytime you want, and you can most certainly see the ocean.”

“I can? I mean, I can’t. It’s not safe.”

“I was speaking with Lord Belvan and Lady Megina this morning, and they agreed it’s time Ingridan observes the Bayern presence. I think a visit

to the shore will be a perfect first outing. We'll leave after second bell tomorrow, Lord Razo."

He was about to protest that second bell was pretty early, just an hour past dawn, and then he thought he had better set her straight about the "Lord" thing. But it did feel rather comfortable just before his name like that, and while he was hesitating, Dasha had turned to go. She bumped into Enna emerging from the stables.

"Oh," said Dasha, seeing Enna.

"Oh," said Enna, seeing Razo.

Dasha did not wait to apologize and was gone in her smooth, hurried gait.

"What're you up to, Enna-girl?" asked Razo.

Enna smiled innocently. "Nothing. Let's go eat."

He suspected she was trying to distract him, but eating did sound like a reasonable plan.

The next morning, the second bell rang with a bone-vibrating noise, as though the brass ball were rolling inside Razo's head. He startled awake, his heart thudding with the reminder that he would be leaving the palace gates today.

At the stables, the Bayern drank cups of tea and mounted their horses. One of the tea girls wore her fluffy yellow hair in two separate bunches, looking like a rabbit with large, drooping ears. When she approached Razo, he recognized her as Pela from the pastry kitchens, one of the glaring girls who seemed to fantasize about cutting out his Bayern heart with her own fingernails.

"Morning, Pela. How's Cinny?" Trying to be friendly, Razo asked after one of the tray girls who had sprained her ankle two days before.

"Lounging in a chair, doing all the easy jobs, and not nearly as pretty as me." Pela put a cup of tea in his hand, stroking his fingers a moment longer than was necessary.

Huh, he thought, *that's a change.* Her touch made him want to look serious and manly, and he downed the stinging hot tea in one gulp. To hide the pain, he turned to mount his horse and botched his whole image by having to scramble up just to stick his foot in the stirrup. Once in the saddle, he discovered his stirrups were so high, his knees were sticking up level with the saddle rim.

“What the—?” He had to dismount and adjust the length. By then Pela had moved off, serving tea to Tumas. They appeared to be chatting intimately.

“New saddle?” asked Finn, riding up.

“Finn, do you see the lias—whatever, the orange-haired girl?” Razo gestured ahead without looking. “Do you think she’s pretty?”

Finn glanced Dasha’s way, then returned his attention to his horse. “She’s all right.”

“Really? Just all right?”

Finn shrugged.

Razo rolled his eyes and tapped Bee Sting to a walk. “What am I saying? He doesn’t think any girl is pretty but Enna.”

“Are there any girls but Enna?” Finn called back.

“There’d better be.”

A memory of Bettin came unbidden—a night in Bayern’s capital four years ago. Isi had been sitting by the fire, telling a bed tale to all the animal workers. It had been a romantic one, the kind that usually made Razo sniff in boredom, but he’d liked it because Bettin had been sitting beside him. That night, all that stuff about a man and a woman and hearts and vows of forever had seemed as real as the fire in the grate.

“Stupid,” Razo muttered. Saying the word made him feel a touch better.

Bee Sting trotted briefly as they passed the palace gates. Razo gripped the hard rim of the saddle, anticipating an attack from angry Tiran citizens, but the streets of Ingridan were sleepy. The dawning sun polished the stones to a soft gold, making the city feel warm and friendly, and street after street, nothing jumped out at them. Still, Razo could not relax.

“Take a look at that,” said Conrad as they passed a palace a quarter the size of Thousand Years. “A feather bed and private room for every guard and maid, I’d bet, and fancy chairs for the dogs and cats, while they’re at it.”

“But what good’s a fancy house like that for the likes of you, Forest-born?” said Razo. “You’d get lost in the corridors and barely survive by eating leather chair covers.”

“That so, squirrel meat? Well, you’d mistake the kitchen for the privy and scare away the pretty maids.”

Victar rode nearby. “That is Lady Dasha’s home.” He wet his lips as he nodded in her direction.

Conrad wagged his eyebrows. “Lives like a princess, and pretty, too.”

“Yes, she is considered a more than adequate match for any noble bachelor of Ingridan.” Victar’s smile was mischievous. “Her father has extensive holdings.”

“With her father in Bayern,” said Razo, “you’d think she’d have plenty to do managing everything. So why’d she volunteer to stay at Thousand Years with the Bayern?”

Victar shrugged slightly, as if he did not know or care.

The party left the main avenue for narrow streets where the houses crowded on top of one another, and the air changed—it swept over Razo as though it were more river than wind, the smell sharp and so briny that it seized the top of his throat.

Then there was the ocean.

The white buildings of the city stopped just shy of the bay, as if afraid of getting their toes wet. In the distance, he could see the harbor and dozens of ships, some grand and long, their masts a forest of trees smoothed of their branches.

Dasha led them to a slim section of shore, as quiet and clean as the morning streets. Razo left Bee Sting at a post and walked across a field of sand.

He knew the ocean was huge because he had been told so, but he could see only the thin line of it before the horizon clamped down. There was no grandeur, not like seeing a mountain; nothing to surround him and make him feel changed, as when he entered a wood or stood in the midst of a snowstorm. Even so, the sea felt bigger than weather, older than ruins. The sight rustled at his soul.

He stared, and his unease lengthened inside him, as though it stretched after sleeping. Up the waves rolled, back they fell, like breath pushed out and pulled back in. The hushing noise made his bones feel soft, his eyes drowsy. He thought he could lie in the sand and forget who he was, let the water and the sound of water unstitch his soul from his body and send it floating away to see what the dead see.

“Do you like it?” asked Dasha.

The sound of her voice startled him. Something about an ocean made him forget he was not alone.

“I don’t know that it’s up to me to like,” he said. “It’s not really a people thing, is it? Not like a city or a farm. It’s got more wilderness about it than

anything I've ever seen."

He thought that was a very apt observation and congratulated himself, waiting for Dasha to agree. She was staring at the water, her lips parted, her eyes losing focus to the crumbling surf, almost as if she were trying to catch a glimpse of someone she knew far out on the waves. He watched her watching the sea and had the peculiar impression that she *knew* the ocean, the way he knew his sister, Rin, or the Forest, or his way around a roasted chicken.

He cleared his throat and spoke again. "It's pretty, even though it's so empty."

She pulled her gaze back to him. "Just under the surface it teems with fish and plants."

"So, it's a forest for fish."

"Exactly! Except, I've never seen a forest."

"Never seen a forest?" Razo shook his head. Now Dasha seemed stranger than a sea. "There was a time I thought my Forest was the world."

"All those trees. And animals, too, right? Is it beautiful?" She rocked on her feet as though too excited to hold still.

"It's home, and I guess I think it's just what it ought to be. Think of it as an ocean of trees, if you want."

"And what do you eat from a forest instead of fish?"

"Sometimes red deer, but that's a big quarry and rare to catch. I hunt some birds, but mostly rabbits or squirrel."

"What is 'squirrel'?"

"It's like a chipmunk, but with a long, fat tail."

Dasha wrinkled her brow, indicating she did not understand.

"Squirrel and chipmunk, they're about this big, furry, kind of like, I don't know, like rats that live in trees."

"Rats? You eat rats?"

"They're not really rats, I was just trying to think of something that—"

"You eat tree rats. That's one rumor of Bayern habits I hadn't heard."

"They're not tree rats really, they're just . . . ugh, I shouldn't've said *rats,* I meant . . . Wait, what rumors have you heard?"

"You eat babies," she said blankly.

"No, you eat babies!"

"I do not!"

“I don’t mean you personally. I mean, that’s what I’ve heard about the Tiran, but I never believed it.”

“And I didn’t believe it about the Bayern.”

“So what are we hollering about?”

“What *are* you hollering about?” asked Enna as she and Finn joined them.

“We weren’t,” said Razo. “Well, maybe, but . . . Dasha, what was I saying?”

Dasha did not seem to take his question seriously. She turned to the newcomers and introduced herself.

“Finn of Bayern’s Own,” said Finn.

“I’m Enna, waiting woman to Lady Megina.”

Razo caught the barest flinch in Dasha’s expression, a dart of her eyes, a subtle indication that perhaps she did not believe what Enna had just said. But she conversed in a friendly manner with Enna, eagerly even, and did not seem the least aware that she was talking to Tira’s great enemy the fire-witch. He discovered his hand was gripping the hilt of his sword and he slowly let go.

Enna said something Razo did not catch, most likely some disparaging comment about him, and Dasha smiled. The way the sun hit Dasha’s eyes, they were so light in color, they appeared translucent. Razo stared.

“Are you all right?” Dasha asked. “Your face looks pained. Did you bite your lip or something? . . . No? Well, we should return. It was a pleasure, Enna, Finn, tree rat.”

She walked away.

Enna and Finn looked at Dasha and then at Razo.

“Did she just call you tree rat?” asked Enna.

“Did she?” said Razo.

“I think she just called you tree rat.”

“No.”

Finn nodded. “She did. She called you tree rat.”

“Why would she—” Enna started.

“Because of squirrels, I guess,” said Razo, still watching Dasha walk away. Negotiating the sand, she took small steps, and her hips kind of swayed. He found it curious.

“Squirrels?” asked Enna.

“Rats in trees,” Razo said distractedly. Dasha seemed to find her walking rhythm from the sound of the surf, almost as if she were not a girl but water upon the sand. His soul whistled an easy tune.

When she had disappeared into the group of Tiran, Razo looked back at Enna and Finn. Both were staring at him, mouths agape.

“What?” he said.

Enna laughed and started back up the beach. “Razo, you’re a picture.”

“I am?” He turned to Finn. “Is that good or bad?”

Finn shrugged. “I’m still trying to figure out *squirrels*.”

On the ride back, Razo contemplated being a picture, and being a tree rat, and the way Dasha had walked up the beach, and the rustling of the ocean. He was feeling pretty good, which made the scene at Thousand Years all the more abrupt.

It was a hornets’ nest.

Clusters of Tiran citizens mobbed outside the palace gates. When they saw the returning Bayern soldiers, the excited shouting turned to anger. Fists pounded the air.

A mounted Tiran guard rushed through the gates and toward the Bayern. Razo loosed his sling and urged Bee Sting closer to Enna and Finn, saying, “I’m sorry,” because he had promised his horse that he would keep her out of another war.

Lord Belvan rode at the head of his own group of soldiers, holding up his bare hand. “Quickly! Captain Talone, let’s get your people into the safety of Thousand Years.”

Talone cantered his horse forward, shouting, “Follow Lord Belvan!”

“What’s happened?” Conrad asked.

No one answered. Lord Belvan’s soldiers surrounded the Bayern, separating them from the citizens on the streets, and led them through the gate. The sun, glaring above the horizon, fumed in its sizzling spring heat.

Inside the grounds, sentries stood with drawn weapons and courtiers and palace workers with unsheathed glares. The Bayern rode past the stable where Razo had followed Enna the day before. Amid a throng of watchers, three men carried something heavy wrapped in a blanket. One man was jostled by the crowd, and he leaned to the side to catch his footing. From beneath the blanket a blackened leg dropped into view.

10

The Captain's Spy

Razo could not catch his breath, and his jaw tightened as if he would throw up. *How can she do this?*

Lord Belvan's men led the Bayern to a back stable, where they tumbled off their mounts and fled into the palace. They ran down a corridor, Belvan barking commands, splitting the Bayern into smaller groups, stuffing them into various rooms and posting guards "until it quiets out there."

"What do you think's going on?" Enna asked.

"It's pretty clear," Razo whispered. He would not look at her. "Talone and I found the first two, Enna. Or were there more? I should've been watching better, but I never could stop you. You'd run off a cliff if the idea took you."

"What're you talking about?" asked Finn.

"That was another body they just found out there. Burned brittle."

"And you think Enna—"

Razo glared. "Who else, Finn?"

Lord Belvan urged Razo into the next room. Razo glanced back at Enna—she was neither furious nor devastated. She was dazed. Stunned to silence. The door shut.

Razo sat on the floor. In memory, her look pierced him like the long, thin thorns that slip deep into skin. He knew now that if Enna had burned those people, she did not know she had.

Razo shared the space with three of Bayern's Own, who spent an hour chewing over the ugly situation.

"If a war starts and we're here . . . ," said one.

"Prisoners for the duration, if not executed on the spot."

"Do you think Lady Megina's to blame? Who is she, anyway? I never heard of the king's cousin till she was suddenly ambassador."

Razo kept quiet, picking at the wood grain. Enna's face had sent him tilting, and he seemed to rock as though unaccustomed to still earth after hours on horseback.

After a second hour, the noise outside their window lost its urgency and dwindled to the hum and rub of every day. When his three companions left to find Talone, Razo stayed.

He was sitting in an abandoned chair before the hearth when Enna burst into the room, slamming the door behind her. She set a fire blazing in the hearth, spitting sparks.

"Watch it, Enna!" Razo leaped from his seat and hopped about, slapping at his clothes.

"You think I didn't know you were there? You think I'd burn you by accident?"

Razo brushed off his lummas, petulant that there were no burned spots to account for his yelping. "You could've—"

"You're fine, Razo."

He barely breathed the question. "Enna, *are* you burning again?"

"No."

"I saw you sneak into that stable yesterday, and I thought—"

Enna put back her head and laughed, but it came out hard, as though the laugh burned her throat. "I was shortening the stirrups on your horse's saddle!"

"My stirrups . . . that was you!"

"Of course it was, you dolt." She tried to sound casual, the kind of voice she used for throwing around insults, but her words were strained. "I didn't burn anybody."

"Are you sure? Not by accident? Not in your sleep or . . . or anything?"

She sat on the floor before her fire. Her fingers rubbed the hem of her tunic, her eyes followed the flames, and Razo thought how Enna, like fire, like wind, could never hold completely still.

"What happened with me and Isi on our journey—I never told you much. Maybe if I had, if you'd understood, you'd know that I've changed, that I . . ." She paused as though she struggled with words. It made him feel proud, that Enna would care what she said to him, that she worried what he thought.

"Isi and I went to Yasid," she continued in her artless voice. "We learned how to share our knowledge of fire and wind languages with each other, so

that we'd have balance. I form fire out of the heat that rises off living things, and during the war, that heat was gathering around me constantly, pressing in, demanding. But now that I have wind speech, too, the wind's always nearby to blow off the heat so it can't overwhelm me. Same with Isi—the wind used to hound her with its speech, with the images of what it had touched. But now that she understands fire speech, too, the heat's always there to break up the wind."

Enna cleared her throat. The sound made her seem young, just a little girl. "What I'm trying to explain is, I'm not the fire's puppet. I can't lose control anymore. So if you still think I'm burning people, you'd have to believe that I'm doing it on purpose. That I want to." She looked now at Razo, and he imagined that because she had been staring at the fire so long, her gaze was hot on his skin. "I don't want to, Razo. And I'm not. And I won't. Burn another person. Never again."

Razo's hands were orange and strange in the firelight. He turned them over, looking for an answer. Something to say. He settled on, "I'm sorry."

Enna frowned. "I guess if people suspect me, it's my own fault."

"But, Enna, if you don't burn, if you won't let yourself, then what good . . . I mean, why are you here? Why'd you demand to come when—"

"During the war, it took me just a few moments to burn down homes that took weeks to build. I ended lives like snapping a twig in two. That can't be all I am, Razo! There's got to be ways I can help without . . . without hurting."

"Isi thought it was too dangerous."

"She worries too much for me, but she believes I can do it, too." She bit her lip. "Do you?"

I want you to, he thought. *I hope you can. I'll help you try.* He just nodded. "If it's not you burning people, that means it's someone else."

"Brilliant," said Enna. "You always were the brightest sheep boy I knew."

Razo gave her a playful knock with his elbow and tried to enjoy the moment, but he had just accused one of his best friends of murdering three people in her sleep.

Finn was waiting outside the door, his hand on his sword hilt, and Razo greeted him without meeting his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Finn. I'm a wooden-headed dummy."

"Don't be so hard," said Finn. "You're just a straw-brained scarecrow."

Razo left hurriedly, claiming an urgent need for a privy, and went to find Talone on his own. It frightened him a bit to face his captain. What could he possibly do to earn his place among Bayern's Own after being so wrong about Enna?

He'd turned a corner in the quiet corridor when he saw Tumas. Razo cursed into his teeth, wishing Finn and Enna would come this way, and in a hurry. He started to turn back, but Tumas grabbed his shoulder.

"Well, if it isn't the knee biter," Tumas said in his stuffed-nose whine. "Care for a rematch? Come on, right now, you with a sword and me with a feather."

Razo kept his eyes down, as he would if running into a Forest wolf. He stepped to the side, and Tumas followed, blocking his way.

"Don't think I forgot how you pushed my friend Hemar into scratching you. He didn't deserve a slow death in a desert."

From behind a closed door came muffled voices laughing, and Razo let himself believe they were laughing at him, too. He took those laughs like punches, absorbing their impact, feeling the ache they left behind. He sidestepped again, and Tumas blocked.

"If you wanted to dance, you could've asked," said Razo, eyes still down.

"Bayern scum." Tumas glanced around as if afraid that others might come this way any moment, and he let Razo sidle by.

Razo was going to let it go, he should have let it go, but he was so tired of rolling over for the bullies, belly up like a puppy. As he walked away, he said, "You still sore that a Bayern boy whipped you with a wooden sword? Pathetic."

The strike hit Razo's back. A fist? A boot? He crunched to the floor, his breath in knots. Tumas picked him up by his tunic and yanked him into a dark room.

"Pathetic?" said Tumas.

A punch to the belly. A deep, groaning kind of pain.

"Pathetic?" said Tumas.

A jab to the nose. A shattering pain, piercing, blinding.

Razo's voice was caged—he could no more yell for help than he could stop the low moaning in his gullet. He thought he'd been knocked around enough by his brothers to take any good pummeling, but there was murder behind Tumas's strikes that left Razo breathless. He tumbled to his feet, pitching about, desperate to hit back before the next blow killed him.

Laughter rumbled through the walls, and a single set of footsteps passed by the door.

Tumas spat a curse. “This is not over,” he said.

It was many dizzying moments before Razo realized that he was alone, slumped against a wall in a dim room, and, if the pain was any indication, still alive.

“Pathetic,” he whispered, wiping blood from his nose.

Talone was in his chamber with three soldiers when Razo burst in. After a glance at Razo’s face, he told the men to leave.

“What happened?” asked Talone.

“Nothing.” From a very young age, Razo had learned that tattling was a way to invite a worse thumping. “Just send me home.”

“No.”

Never before had Razo wanted to strike Talone.

“Why’m I here, Captain? To humiliate myself at sword practice? To go crazy thinking my best friend is a murderer? Which she’s not, by the way. I was wrong. This whole city is crossing its fingers for war, and I’m just tinder for the fire. Why me when you’ve got Enna and Finn and Conrad and all the best of the Own? I’m just . . .” He punched a wall. “I’m not deaf, I hear what everyone thinks of me, and they’re right, I’m no Bayern’s Own. My brothers always told me I’m slow in the head, my arms are wet rags, I’m only imposing to a bunny rabbit, I’m—”

“Who has ink-stained hands?” Talone interrupted.

Razo could not have been more stunned to stuttered confusion than if Talone had danced a jig. “I’m telling you that I’m pathetic, and I’m through here and . . . Ink-stained hands? What’re you—”

“Don’t think, soldier, just answer my question. Who has ink-stained hands?”

“Uh, Geric does, sometimes, on his right hand. But why do—”

“Who often has candle wax dripped on her dress?”

“I’m not in a gaming mood, Captain.”

“Candle wax.”

Razo threw up his hands. Talone was a boulder too heavy to push out of the way. “Isi’s waiting woman, the one who wears her braids in loops.”

“And who wears sandals far too long for his toes?”

“I guess that squat-nosed page does, the one who brings you messages from Lord Belvan.”

“Not everyone has such observation, or such memory, and you do it without seeming to pay attention to anything beyond dinner.”

Razo sniffed, and a grating sound and prickly pain made him wish he had not. “I don’t think it’s such a big thing. You noticed those things, too.”

“I had to probe my memory pretty thoroughly to come up with something to challenge you.” He’d been cleaning his boots and only now looked up. “You always were a good scout, Razo, and I have long believed that you have the makings of a very good spy.”

“Spy?”

“You fell into that role without my prodding. To answer your question—you are here, Razo, to continue the work you did for me during the war. Instead of scouting Tiran camps for troop numbers and locations, you will scout information: Who is trying to respark the war? Who is burning bodies?”

“You’ve had me in mind as a spy all along? Since Bayern, even?”

“I waited to give you your assignment until the need presented itself. In the sword match, I set you up against Tumas because I don’t want the Tiran to think of you as a threat. If you seem weak, your invisibility increases.”

“You humiliated me and could’ve lost me an eyeball, and on purpose?”

Talone nodded.

Razo made a sound of exasperation and fumbled for words. “You . . . you know . . . back home, that kind of underhanded trickery would get you wrestled facedown in goat dung.”

Talone smiled. He actually smiled. And Razo smiled back. Foolishly, no doubt. He felt as though he had brought a fat hare back to his mother’s stewpot and been cheek kissed and head patted. This was usually the part where his brothers would jump him as soon as her back was turned, but there were no brothers around.

Here, Razo was a *spy.*

“So, you believe Enna is innocent? That is good news,” said Talone, accepting Razo’s assessment without further inquiry. “I suspect you have already latched on to new suspects.”

Razo realized that he had. “There’s Tumas, old pork-chop head.”

“Pork-chop . . . ? Ah, his ears. Yes, that firebrand has not been coy. There’s not a body in the city who doesn’t know he hates Bayern.”

“He had opportunity.” Razo played with a javelin, digging the tip between the tiles. “With the first murder, he could’ve ridden ahead of the

Tiran escort and left that body by the river. But his captain, Ledel, he's a strict fiend. I don't think any of his men would scoot a toe over a line without his consent. Except maybe Victar. He doesn't seem to give a rat's tail for anybody's authority. And then there's Manifest Tira, that group I told you about who think Tira ought to return to war. Lord Belvan turn up anything about them?"

"Not yet. Any other suspicions?"

"Well, um, maybe, it's not likely, but maybe . . . Dasha, the Tiran ambassador's daughter?" Razo sniffed to show that he was not in the least convinced it was she, and his nose throbbed anew. "Ow. Once I found her prowling outside Enna's room, and she was sneaking near the stable the day before they found the third body. She'd have to be working with someone else to have arranged the drop of the one by the border, and no way she could carry the bodies herself."

"Hm," said Talone. "Belvan mentioned that she was eager to volunteer as our liaison and live at Thousand Years. If it is Dasha, then she and her father might be conspiring together to sabotage peace. Our queen and king could be in peril. You said she was interested in Enna? If she knows that Enna is the fire-speaker, she may be targeting Enna herself."

Panic swooped in Razo's belly. "Isi was right, it's too dangerous for Enna. I mean, I'm her *friend,* and I thought she was a murderer. If any Tiran even suspects that she was the fire-witch, she'll be trussed and hanged by sundown."

"You're right," said Talone. "Which means Dasha may not know."

"Send Enna home."

"No. We may need her. Besides, she won't go."

No, she would not, curse her. Razo knocked the bag of stones against his leg and swore to himself that he would do anything to help Enna keep from burning people again.

"Anyone else?" Talone asked.

"The day of our match, I overheard Captain Ledel say he was anxious to see Bayern soldiers fail without fire fighting for us. But then again, he placed a death sentence on his own soldier who stuck me with a dagger, so it seems like he doesn't have a grudge against Bayern. And, well, the prince hasn't made a hair of an effort to get to know any of the Bayern, and he'd have the power to order murders himself, I imagine. Besides, remember how the crazy assassin who killed Veran in the barracks was shouting,

‘Long live His Radiance’? I heard from the pastry girls that ‘Radiance’ is what everyone calls Tira’s prince.”

“The prince . . .”

“But the more I think about it, the more I see that we don’t know anything, not even if there’s a genuine fire-speaker on the loose or just some crazy who burns victims in a bonfire to make it look like the work of a fire-witch. I almost liked it better when I thought it was Enna. Now I feel like I saw a spider drop under my bedcovers and I don’t know where it is or when it’ll bite.”

“And what would you do with the spider?”

“I’d get out of bed.”

Talone shook his head. “We leave Tira now, we look guilty. No, too much is at stake. The real threat of war is greater than the uncertain fear of assassination.”

“That’s basically what Megina was talking about when she wouldn’t let Belvan move us somewhere safer.”

“Sometimes she seems surprisingly wise, doesn’t she?” Talone looked out the window. “Razo, I have some misgivings about this assignment. We both know you’re not the most . . . subtle . . . person. Don’t throw yourself into trouble you can’t handle. Just observe, and always come back to me with what you know. And I want you to work this alone. The more people who know what you’re about, the more danger you’ll be in, besides the fact that the murderer could be anyone—even one of our own.”

“So, although Enna could be in danger, or Lord Kilcad could be plotting to kill Isi and Geric, or fanatical Tiran citizens might try to slit all our throats, we’re staying.”

“It sounds to me, my boy, like you had best get to work.”

That night, the Bayern folk took their evening meal in the barracks. The bread was rubbery and the soup cold (on purpose, apparently, another inexplicable Tiran custom).

After refusing to tell Enna and Finn why his nose looked like a pickled beet, Razo stood alone by the window and practiced identifying people from a distance. He watched two men cross a courtyard and successfully named Tumas and Ledel before their faces became clear in the folding dusk. Tumas saw Razo, but instead of smirking at his swollen nose and black eyes, the soldier glanced at Ledel, edgy and uncertain. Apparently Tumas

did not have his captain's approval to pounce on a Bayern and was afraid Ledel would find out. A man like Tumas afraid. The thought made Razo itchy.

He plunked down beside Enna, begging for a back scratch, and asked, "Do you two know someone who has ink-stained hands?"

"Razo," said Enna, scratching lazily, "yet again, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"I mean, have either of you ever noticed someone we know well who's always got ink stains on his hands? Uh, hand actually. Just one . . . No guesses? But if I say Geric, now you'll remember, right? . . . No? But if you had to guess *which* hand is always ink-stained, you'd know that? The right one? You probably knew it was the right one and I just said it too fast."

Enna continued her stare. Finn's brows raised, halfway between surprised and amused.

Razo laughed self-consciously. "I'm just . . . I . . . Never mind." He turned back to his soup. Still cold.

Maybe Talone *was* right about him. And except for the threat of immediate death to him and his closest friends, this spying business might be something of a lark.

11

What the Kitchen Girl Found

Razo woke feeling strangely eager to get up and see the day happen, as though he were ten years old on the morning of the wintermoon festival. Then he remembered.

He was a spy.

The other soldiers ate breakfast sullenly, but Razo whistled a dance song. He stopped after a few glares warned that he was either too jovial or just plain out of tune.

"At least the Tiran didn't murder us in our sleep," said Razo.

Conrad snapped a boot lace pulling it too tight. His eyes were heavy with sleeplessness. "If they're going to, I wish they'd get it over with already."

"This whole mess is a bit more complicated than watching geese or sheep, isn't it?"

"Sometimes I miss our old animal keeper days, and then I remember." Conrad looked directly into Razo's eyes and whispered, "We're in Bayern's Own." He laughed, as pleased as a gaggle of geese on a spring morning. "I still can't believe our luck."

Talone came midmorning with unexpected orders. "Lady Megina will go out into the city and dine with the chief of assembly today."

A few soldiers chuckled. "She's bold, that one." Others raised eyebrows, questioning if it was wise. When Talone named Razo part of the guard, he thought he detected an uncertain flicker in several of his comrades' faces.

I'm a spy, he wished he could explain to them. *I'm not completely useless. At least, I won't be. Eventually. Hopefully.*

They rode in closed carriages to the chief of assembly's palace, smaller than Thousand Years but more decadent, its capstones and pillars twisting with stone vines and plaster flowers.

“Lovely place for a massacre,” Razo whispered to Finn as they climbed the steps.

The door guard let Megina and Enna pass but stopped Razo, Finn, Talone, and the five other Bayern soldiers, demanding they leave their weapons at the door.

“Do it,” said Megina.

During the meal, Razo watched the ambassador carefully as she devoured slimy sea creatures cooked in their shells, appearing to relish every bite. And the talk . . . Razo’s eyeballs itched with annoyance. She did not even mention the burned body or assert Bayern’s innocence. She just gabbed—about the weather, about food, saying things that made the chief of assembly laugh.

“What do you think about Megina?” Razo asked Finn. They stood on the far side of the room and under the noise of dining could speak without being heard.

“You don’t think she’s trustworthy?” asked Finn.

“I don’t know. . . . Geric thought she was, but . . . well, I guess lately everyone’s looking squirmy to me.”

“I wish she’d negotiated about our weapons.” Finn patted his belt. “I don’t like being without my sword. Feels like I’ve lost a limb.”

“Lost a limb? Not hardly. Javelin’s all right for reaching a back itch, and a sword’s a good prop, but no weapon feels easy in my hand.”

“What about your sling?” asked Finn.

Razo blinked. A sling was not really a weapon, not unless you were a squirrel.

The third hour of the dinner hobbled on, and Razo was almost wishing for a brawl with the chief of assembly’s guards, just to break the boredom.

“Finn, do you think I can hit Enna with a pebble from here?”

“Not a chance,” said Finn, though there was the suggestion of a smile around his mouth.

Enna was sitting behind Megina, leaning back on her hands, staring at the ceiling. Razo eased a small pebble out of his pouch, and keeping his arm down straight at his side, he flicked it, striking Enna on the shoulder.

“What . . . ?” Enna sat up.

Razo bit his lip to throbbing to kill his laugh and stared straight ahead. Finn breathed out an almost silent chuckle.

“Did you ask something?” said Megina.

“No, my lady,” said Enna. “Just a cough.”

Razo felt a sting on the side of his neck and slapped it, thinking it was an insect. Until he smelled burning hair. He looked at his palm. She had singed a single hair from his neck.

By the time they dragged into Thousand Years, the sun was making a show of setting, the sky all rust and gold and heaving with clouds. After hours of standing at attention, Razo thought he could eat his saddle raw. The pastry kitchen was empty, the only sound a low fire snapping at a log. No sooner had he started to poke around for a treat than Pela hopped through the door, her shrubs of yellow hair flopping. Instinctively, he moved toward the door, not feeling safe alone around a girl like Pela with so many sharp knives about. *But she’s become friendlier,* he thought, remembering how she touched his hand when giving him a cup of tea.

“There you are.” She set down an empty tray. “I have something to show you.”

“You do?” Razo hoped it was something to eat.

“Yes, but it will cost you.”

He was about to protest his poverty when in some slur of movement, some hitch of skirt, leg wrapped around leg, hop, and a trip, Razo found himself sitting on a stool against the wall, Pela on his lap, her legs bestride his.

“Oh,” he said. Or perhaps grunted. She was pleasantly robust. He squeezed his arms against his sides in case she tried to tickle him.

“I don’t want much,” she said, affecting a shy face and toying with his lummas.

Enna often declared that when it came to catching innuendo, Razo was as slow as a dead hare fleeing, but he thought he had a handle on this.

“What is it?” He was appalled to find that his voice had tangled in his throat and came out less of a manly inquiry and more of a squeal. He did not want her to think that she was the only girl ever to climb onto his lap, so he grumbled his throat clear and asked again, “What is it?”

She leaned in closer, her lips just separated from his.

“A parchment,” she whispered. Her breath tickled his face, and he tried not to squirm. She smelled nice, like salted meat, and that made him want to hold very still so that she would not go away.

“What’s on the parchment?” His hands were still tight to his sides. Should he put them on her waist or back or something?

“I don’t know, but when I entered Lady Dasha’s room, she stuffed it away, hiding it all suspicious-like, and since you were nudging for any information on her the other day, I pinched it for you this morning. And all I want for it is—”

“You took a parchment from Dasha’s room?” He bolted upright, sending Pela tumbling to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he said, leaning over her, trying to help her upright. “Whoops, that was awkward.” She reached for his hand, but he was trying to lift her from under her shoulders, and she fell on her rump again.

“Never mind, I’m fine,” she said, finally gaining her feet on her own and shaking her skirt clean. Her entire face glowed red.

Razo picked up a folded paper that must have fallen from her pocket. “Is this it?”

The door banged open and a parade of girls with empty trays poured through. Pela and Razo took a few guilty steps away from each other, Razo stuffing the parchment into the waist of his leggings.

“Hello, Razo.”

“Evening, Razo.”

The freckled girl came in laughing. “Did Lord Rogis’s son Victar propose to anyone else at dinner or just me?”

“Stay away from that one!” said another. “Acts as if he’ll drape amber around your neck, but the word is he and his rich father aren’t even talking. . . .”

Razo said hello to all the girls and kissed the pastry chef’s cheek, telling her she worked too hard and to let the girls finish up so she could go soak her feet. When he left, Pela followed him out the door, pressing herself against his back, her mouth on his ear. He could feel some nice parts of her body touching his.

“If you don’t return that before Lady Dasha notices, my skin will pay for it,” she whispered. “Her chamber door is unlocked. Read it quickly, then go stick the parchment back beneath her lamp. She won’t be back tonight, so you could look around a bit too, if it helped.”

Razo nodded and left, but not before she patted his bum.

Thoughts of Pela chased after him down the dark corridor, inching over his skin, wriggling so that the hairs of his arms stood up. She was a pretty girl. And, well, she was any girl. He had not thought much of anyone since Bettin.

He paced outside Talone's dark apartment in the heavy huff of night, flicking pebbles with his thumbnail to hear them pop against the door. With every moment his anxiety tightened, a rope twisting. Getting caught with a parchment stolen from Lady Dasha's room would not do much to ease the political tension.

Some hour later, the captain returned, emanating the salty fish smell of Tiran dinner.

"It's about time," said Razo. "If there's ever any doubt of my commitment to Bayern and peace, know that I missed a meal to wait for you."

"There was never a doubt." Talone ushered him inside and lit a lamp.

"Found in Dasha's room and I've got to get it back quick, but I don't know reading."

Talone scanned the parchment. "This looks like notes taken while studying some books. She cites several sources that mention 'fire-witches.' "

"Uh-oh."

"Indeed." He studied it, his brow furrowed. "She seemed interested in the fire worshippers from Yasid, people who know how to work both fire and water. Here's a note at the bottom that says, 'Apparently live healthy all their lives,' underlined twice."

"You think Dasha is the . . ."

Talone shook his head. "After Enna, we won't make the mistake to assume anything, not without definitive proof."

So Razo set off to find proof. He scurried down the servants' walkway until it climbed into the lamplit main corridor of the palace. A dusting girl passed by, and Razo ducked into a side hallway just in time, grinning at the darkness. Skulking around a palace was quite a bit more exciting than hunting squirrels. The fear of being caught gave speed to his blood and made his pulse click in his ear.

He'd followed Dasha once before and remembered which door was hers. He knocked, peered inside, then jumped in and shut the door, quiet as brushing two feathers together. He smiled at his own stealth, then swaggered right into a chair, banging it against the wall.

You oaf. He cut short his swagger and began to move with exaggerated sneakiness. There was a certain pleasure in that, too.

Three large windows opened to the central courtyard, allowing the pale moonlight to creep in and over everything, marking the chairs and tables with rims of silver. He did not know what he was looking for, but clothing streaked with soot might be a handy implication of guilt.

He slid the parchment beneath a lamp on a table. Various bottles, jars, and wooden boxes were arranged in pretty little groups. He peered into a few—powders, mint leaves for chewing, a yellow cream that had no odor. He shook a silver tube, heard the muted slosh of liquid, and raised the cap to his nose. A perfume of tangerine blossoms teased him with uncertain intimacy. What did it remind him of? He closed his eyes, and the scent pulled him into a memory of the ocean, his feet uneven in the sand, the lulling hush of waves, and Dasha standing close.

Razo sorted through the wardrobe—no burn marks, no scent of smoke. So he shrugged at the moon, slipped into the corridor, and stood a moment by her door, wondering what to do next.

"Tree rat!"

Razo jumped back at least two steps and hit his back against a wall. His heart banged so hard against his ribs, it felt bruised.

"Dasha . . . Lady Dasha . . . I . . ."

"Oh, what happened to your nose?"

"Nothing." He sniffed. "Ouch. I mean, it broke. Accident."

"I'm sorry. Were you looking for me just now?"

He nodded, not quite ready to give up the support of the wall. "Yes, um, how are you?"

Dasha smiled, and her nose crinkled. How did that one expression make him feel as helpless as if two big brothers sat on his chest or Pela straddled his lap?

"So I guess that means you heard." Dasha opened her door and handed him her lamp. "There was no one here, but I wouldn't mind having you look around again."

What is she talking about? Razo wondered, but he played along, holding the lamp aloft and walking through her rooms.

"Of course," she said, "it was probably a lie all along. The door *was* unlocked for some reason, but why would a Bayern hide in my rooms and wait to murder me? I told the soldiers that when they came for me an hour ago, but they insisted on escorting me to my rooms. Said they'd had a very reliable tip. Nonsense, I said, and sure enough, the soldiers didn't find

anyone lurking about. I've just now come from Lord Belvan's chambers, convincing him that the Bayern aren't a threat to me no matter what some troublemaker claimed."

Razo realized that if he'd come here as soon as he'd left Pela instead of going to Talone first, he would have been the one stalking Dasha's rooms, just in time for soldiers to burst in. The light in Razo's hand swayed, sending shadows zooming across the walls.

"Nothing appears to be missing." She removed her lummas and laid it directly over the parchment Razo had replaced. Coincidence, or was she hiding it?

"All . . . all clear," he said, pleased his voice betrayed only a petty tremble.

"Thank you." She took the lamp and smiled at him, right into the ghostly light. "I've been meaning to tell someone from your party that I'll be leaving tomorrow, back to my father's estate. In the summer, the assembly is in recess, and most people return to their lands in the country. I will be away for three months, but Lord Belvan will be here to aid you. Look at you! You seem crushed."

He did? "I'm not." That seemed rude. "I mean, I'll miss you." What was he saying? "But I hope you have a good time." He was a spy; he should be trying to find out information. "I guess you have business to deal with in the country. Well, have you, you know, taken care of everything you need to here?"

"I have tried. . . ." A shiver of uncertainty crossed her face, as though she'd stepped on something sharp and tried to hide the pain. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

Her stare pinned him, and he had the sudden and unhappy conviction that small though she was, this Dasha was as dangerous to play with as a well-sharpened dagger.

"You wouldn't just ask for no reason. What would I need to take care of?"

"Just . . . stuff. I mean, I was just wondering if I could do anything for you while you're gone."

"I'm in a real muddle, Razo. I wish . . ." She looked at him, so hard that it made him squirm. "No, I don't think you can help me."

“Are you sure? I’m pretty smart.” That sounded stupid. He inhaled through the space in his front teeth as if he could suck those words back inside.

“You don’t . . . Never mind. But thank you.”

Her thanks seemed so genuine, he had a passing stitch of guilt for pretending to offer help after prowling around her chambers, searching for a sign that she was a murderer.

“Um, uh, you’ll be wanting to get sleep, then, I guess, if you’re on your way tomorrow.”

He left, congratulating himself for coming up with the weakest good-bye ever spoken.

In short order, his guilt was overcome by a cramp of hunger. He found a tangerine tree in the courtyard and looted the leaves for the last of the season, eating the stingingly sweet fruit in its branches. The ground felt too dangerous, the place where Tiran like Tumas walked, eager for a chance to skip the nose breaking and move on to Razo’s spine. Rubbed between the sensation of fear and the pleasure of food, he watched Dasha’s window.

A lamp flickered on her windowsill. Had she lit it without spark or flint? She knew something, Razo was certain. Her gaze often shifted, her fingers twitched. Her bearing declared too heartily that she was happy, fine, all openness and nothing to hide.

So what did she hide?

The lamp sputtered; the window went dark.

12

The Best Sling Finn Ever Saw

Razo woke to the guttering snores in the barracks, sat up, yawned, and gasped for air. Heat weighed down his body, slick and damp, crawling into his mouth and down his throat with each breath. It seemed the change of seasons had accosted the city of rivers overnight.

The Bayern soldiers staggered into their boots and outside, hoping to find breathable air, but out was as stifling as in, shade as scorching as sunlight. The air was heavy with ocean, the invisible drops of water clinging to everything. Razo wondered if he might drown.

"Welcome to an Ingridan summer," said Victar, joining Razo on the way to breakfast.

"This heat's cruel mean."

"No meaner than a Bayern winter." Victar recounted winter nights during the Tiran invasion, runny noses forming tiny icicles on upper lips, raids canceled because the men could not lift a spear for shivering. He flung his words casually, laughing and gesturing with no hesitation. He seemed completely unaware how his talk of the recent war tightened the mood around him.

"My elder brother is already at our father's estate in the country, but I'm a military man now and must stand the heat like any Ingridan lad. The rich and squeamish flee the city summer. The hearty stay behind."

"Stay and sweat," said Victar's friend.

The two companies breakfasted in a dark, first-story room in the north wing of the palace, all the windows open, holding their breath for a breeze. The cheese was salty, the bread gristly, and Razo missed his ma's stewpot with a cruel ache. But he was becoming crazed for those spicy Ingridan olives. He liked how when he bit them, they bit back.

He had filled his plate and was about to join Conrad when Victar waved him over. *Might be good to make friends with some Tiran,* he thought.

Razo was gabbing with Victar's friends when Tumas entered, as big and angry as the heat. He looked at Razo, and his lips twitched in what might have been a smile, though it resembled more the snarl of a feral dog. Razo returned an openmouthed grin and waved with mock glee.

"Tiran Fifth Company," called Ledel's secondman, a lean, tall soldier with skin tanned dark brown. He stood in the doorway, waiting for the room to quiet.

"Where's your captain?" Razo asked Victar in a whisper.

"On one of his many jaunts, I suppose. Yesterday was a feast day, and the captain always disappears on feast days. Beat me with a spear if I know where he goes."

"I have news from Lord Belvan," said the secondman. "Our summer assignment has changed to the Tacitan province. We leave in the morning."

The Tiran cheered and slapped the tables. Razo guessed Tacitan was a cool, windy place.

"For once, birdface Belvan does something right," said a young, squinty friend of Tumas. The raucous laugh among the Tiran made Razo feel as though he'd been insulted but was too thickheaded to see.

"What'd Belvan do so wrong?" Razo asked Victar.

"He was opposed to the war from the beginning and was not demoted after the failed invasion. Nowhere outside his own company is that man much loved."

"Do you like him?" asked Razo.

Victar shrugged. "I don't concern myself with him."

"What say we have a last bout with these Bayern boys?" asked Tumas, his glance sliding over Razo. "Stretch our backs before the long march?"

Talone was having his weekly meeting with Lord Belvan, so Brynn was in charge of the Bayern. He looked around, gauging the eagerness in the expressions of his countrymen. Finn had been the sound victor at the last scuffle, and none of Bayern's Own seemed opposed. Razo wondered if he could sneak away unnoticed.

"Heartily accepted," said Brynn. "Bayern's Own don't turn down a challenge."

Yes, yes, all right, curse them, thought Razo. *I'm an Own. I won't flee.*

He grumbled as he followed the others to the training ground, tapping his javelin against his backside, herding himself like a sheep to the slaughtering shed. Enna and Finn caught up with him.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Mock combat. You going to join us, Finn?"

"Sure, I'll play."

Razo snorted. If this was *play,* the game should be called Humiliate Razo with a Wooden Sword, not unlike many of his childhood games: Five Brothers Wrestle Razo, Little Man Underfoot, Razo the Rug, Razo Our Tiny Foe. His mother never had guessed why her youngest son spent so much time tromping alone through the trees with his sling.

They arrived at the training ground before Razo had been able to formulate any plan. He stood on the sidelines, cheering and jesting with the others. Inwardly he crouched and shuddered and felt that bowl of olives in his stomach start to churn.

Ledel arrived, carrying a bundle of something under his arm. "What is going on?" His voice was raspy again from lack of sleep, and his jaw scar was an unpleasant purple color.

"Another bout, Captain," said the secondman, "before we prepare to leave. Your permission to continue?"

The Tiran soldiers held still, waiting. Victar yawned.

"Proceed," said Ledel, though he seemed particularly grumpy about something.

Brynn set up two fighting rings, and practice battles began to swirl and clash, Tiran and Bayern stepping in and out. With each defeat the sun scorched hotter.

Waiting for his first turn, Razo bounced on the balls of his feet, chewing on his bottom lip. The heat made his eyelids sticky and lungs heavy. Though not as heavy as his stomach. He burped extravagantly.

"Razo," Brynn called.

"And Victar," said the Tiran secondman.

Razo hopped into the ring, wiped the sweat from his palm, and gripped the wooden sword. He was so relieved it was not Tumas, he winked at Victar as though he were having a lark. Like Finn, Razo dodged the first swing and the second, made a few jabs, and dodged again. His focus was so taut, a rope could have tied his gaze to his opponent. He swung and dodged, rolled and hopped up again, and felt he was really doing well.

“Match, for Tira,” said the secondman.

Razo had not even felt the sword graze the middle of his jerkin. A few of Bayern’s Own shook their heads.

Two failed matches later, noon was nearing, and the heat fell straight down, pushing his shadow into a pool around his feet. That spit of shade did nothing—his toes were hot and scratchy. Razo thought there might be just one more chance to redeem himself.

When Brynn called his name again, he strutted into the ring, calm and confident, and took his stance opposite Tumas’s red-nosed, lisping friend. The Tiran swung, Razo dodged, swooped. And met a sword hilt in the stomach.

He stumbled forward, shuffling on his toes, and vomited cheese and olives beside someone’s sandals.

“Was that necessary?” asked the Tiran in slightly stained sandals.

“Sorry,” said Razo. He straightened and saw that the other ring’s match had ended and all eyes were on him.

Tumas was elbowing his friend. “I told you that little one is a joke, and if you ask me, he makes the whole lot of them laughable.” He glanced at Ledel as if checking for his permission to keep speaking, then said to Brynn, “When my horse didn’t do the job, I put him out of his misery.”

“That’s enough,” said Brynn, because Ledel, for some reason, did not.

Razo shambled a few more steps away and flung the wooden sword at the ground. Words were churning in his belly that he was ready to belch up. He almost said, “That’s it.” He almost yelled, “I’m through. I quit. I’m an embarrassment, a scarecrow, noodle-armed, sized for tossing. I’m gone.”

The words burned like stomach acid on the back of his tongue, and if he had spoken them, he would have lived by them—he would have gone home to the Forest and spent his days solitary among his brothers’ families. At least, in the moment before he spoke, he envisioned that future. It was a prospect he would not have to test out, because Finn spoke first.

“Try him with a missile weapon.”

Finn had been sitting on a stone, his sword upright in the dirt, his hands resting on the cross. He had been silent after each of his three victories and silent as he watched. When he spoke, his unruffled voice was loud enough to cut through the noise.

Some of the Tiran laughed.

“A game of spears would be the cake to this meal,” said Tumas.

Finn shook his head. “Razo’s sling to your spear.”

Some of the Bayern looked away, as though embarrassed that Finn had brought a sheep boy’s plaything into a soldier’s battle. The Tiran laughter pitched and climbed.

Razo sidled up to Finn, swatting at the sweat trickling into his eyes. “What’re you doing? Trying to humiliate me further?”

Finn stood, tapped the dirt off his sword tip, and put it in his sheath. He met Razo’s eyes, and his expression was as sincere as that of a child too young to lie. “You’re the best sling I ever saw.”

“I am not. Why’re you making up stuff? I’m just . . . Never mind, the captain wouldn’t want me flaunting my sling around anyway.”

“Why not? Talone didn’t tell me to pull back during sword bouts. It’ll be good for the Tiran to have a little respect for us.”

Razo laughed through his nose. “I’m not good enough to cause fear.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” said Finn, but a glint in his eye said he thought otherwise. It made Razo want to go prove him right.

Ledel was giving orders for their march east, soldiers were sheathing swords, gathering idle javelins and spears. Finn walked right into their midst.

“Captain Ledel, we’re not done yet. Let Razo sling.”

A couple of Bayern groaned. Ledel met Finn’s eyes without blinking, reminding Razo of some lidless creature, a snake, a spider. His voice rasped. “We are not sullying a match of men with a peasant weapon.”

That smacked of insulting Bayern, and a few soldiers, especially Conrad and Luzo, who were also Forest-born, put up a fuss.

“That is enough,” said Ledel, his voice sharp enough to split skin.

“Hello!” Dasha bounded up the path, waving and smiling.

“Lady Dasha.” Ledel inclined his head respectfully, and his men stood at attention.

“Captain Ledel, good morning.” Behind her trudged six men loaded down with leather satchels and clothing bundles. Her orange hair was loose, wisps tickling her face. She brushed them away with a smile as though they were playful kittens. “And all my Bayern friends. I am off and wanted to say farewell and tell you . . .” She paused, seeming to notice the chilly mood. “What’s happening?”

“Razo’s challenging the Tiran to missile weapons,” said Finn, “his sling to their spears, but Captain Ledel won’t have it.”

Dasha laughed, thoroughly amused. “And why not, Captain Ledel? You aren’t afraid?”

The muscle under Ledel’s face scar twitched. “Go on, Antoch,” he said to his secondman, “but I will not stay to watch. We leave at eighth bell.”

The Tiran did not wait until Ledel was out of sight before they began to draw lines in the dirt and hold tug matches to determine who got to face Razo first.

Razo hefted his pouch of stones like a merchant guessing weight and price. What if he lost? Certainly his mark as the greatest failure in Bayern’s Own would be indelible. But if he succeeded, could it spark another clash like the one after Finn’s victory? Or something worse? The stifling heat was the kind that smothered good judgment.

Then Razo noticed that Dasha was watching him, her smile full of marvelous expectation. He stepped up to the line.

The secondman indicated a tree trunk some twenty paces away as the target. Razo frowned.

“Losing heart, are you?” Tumas yelled.

If Razo had not felt so hot and wretched after losing three sword matches, he would have laughed. That target was a mite easy. He put his toes behind the line in the dirt, inserted a stone into his sling’s leather pouch, spun once, and released. The stone hit the center of the trunk with a noise like a long whip cracking.

Most of the Tiran wanted a go, some hitting the tree with their spear, grazing it, or missing altogether. Razo’s stones smacked against the center, again and again.

“Put other thlingerth at the mark,” said Tumas’s lisping friend.

The best Tiran slingers fetched hemp slings and almond-shaped lead bullets from the armory. Now the targets were three metal pails sitting atop a log forty paces away. Razo put three stones in his left hand and turned his left side to the pails. He placed the first stone in the leather pouch, swung and released, heard the *whiz* of stone cutting air and the metallic *clang* of the pail even as he placed another stone in the pouch, released, *whiz-clang,* never stopping the circle, and a third *whiz-clang.* Those sounds felt as satisfying as cold water in an empty belly.

Out of the ten Tiran slingers, only the squinty-eyed soldier hit three for three. The Tiran soldiers cheered him until Finn said, “Move the target back.”

The pails now waited sixty paces away, and the Tiran missed twice. Razo's turn was a song that rang out in threes.

The Bayern were getting restless and bunched together, keen for their turn at the pails. After a couple of rounds, only Conrad and Luzo had hit all three.

"Move the target back," Finn said, smiling.

Brynn placed the pails at seventy paces. It was a respectable distance. Two pails chimed for Conrad, one for Luzo. Razo readied three stones and noticed a slight tremble in his hand.

Easier than a squirrel who scampers, he thought. *Easier than a twitching hare.*

He swung and released three times. Three pails lay on their sides.

There was a general gasp and chatter that did not have time to build before Finn's clear voice cut through.

"Move the target back."

Some of the men laughed. Brynn, with a mischievous look, took one pail under his arm and walked on. And just kept walking.

"That was far enough five minutes ago," Conrad yelled.

Brynn set it down and jogged back. "One hundred and fifty paces, Razo. Miss already so we can get out of this sun."

Razo stared at the pail, a dark glint on white stone, and felt the heat pressing on the top of his head, insisting itself into each breath. A short sling could never reach that distance. He shook his head and looped up his sling, fastening it to his side.

"Coward," said Tumas, standing very near.

Without pause, Razo pulled his long sling from his waist. It was a small target for the distance sling, but everyone was watching. Dasha was watching. He felt clamped in and squeezed inside the moment, and the only way out was forward.

He tried pretending that he was alone, that the heat was the pressure of Forest shadows, and the whispers and shifting of boots were just the trees moaning.

He placed the shot in the pouch and whipped the sling at his side, angled to the ground. His body leaned with the motion, tipping forward, slanting back, pulled always toward the stone as it clung to the sling's pouch. The weight of the stone felt good, the length of the sling just right. When the stone completed the third circle, he let go his thumb, his right arm

stretching forward. He could hear the stone cut through the air, a hum that lowered in pitch until it exploded in a metallic crash.

He breathed hard as though he had run a league and turned slowly to face the others. They were silent, staring at his downed target. The Bayern started to smile.

"What about Razo," Conrad whispered, his breath full of awe.

A few soldiers chuckled, laughing as though they could not believe.

"What about Razo!" Conrad spoke louder, inviting a cheer.

"Bayern!" some shouted.

"Bayern's Own!"

"Razo and Bayern!"

Razo shivered in the heat, waiting for the Tiran reaction. Dasha was the first to respond. She was smiling.

"Ledel was right to have been afraid."

Victar laughed his deep belly laugh. "He schooled us well. Excellent."

The Tiran who had shared Razo's breakfast table that morning smothered him with congratulatory jabs. Hands clapped his back, shoulders lifted him aloft, then dumped him back into more backslaps. He laughed nervously, feeling at once large as a mountain and small as prey. Finn was beside him.

"Why didn't you tell me before that I was so good?" asked Razo. He found he was almost angry about it, except that he felt like crowing.

"Didn't seem to matter before," said Finn.

Enna was sitting in the thin shadow of the barracks, wiping laugh tears from her eyes. She seemed surprised to be laughing and so pleased with it as to keep it up as long as possible.

Brynn and others were anxious to go lunch in a nice, shady place, and they pulled Razo along with them. Tumas made a point to leave in the opposite direction with several of Ledel's soldiers, their lips moving as though they grumbled. The secondman had disappeared.

"Never saw such slinging," said one of Victar's friends. "Good show. I hardly thought it a weapon, but I see that a sling can be deadly in the hands of a master."

A master, thought Razo. *He means me.*

"Razo."

Razo's skin shuddered under sweat at Talone's voice. He ducked away from the group and went to his captain.

"I did something wrong," said Razo.

“Yes. I wish you had not shown an entire company of Tiran soldiers how handy my spy is with a sling. You’re supposed to be invisible.”

“I didn’t know I was that good! I swear, Captain.”

“Neither did I.” Talone frowned. In a way that Razo could not explain, the frown remained a frown but also became a smile. “Be ready with that sling. You may have to use it.”

13

The Season of the Prince

Summer tightened its burning grip. The air was dense and wet and followed Razo around like the hot huff of some large creature. The city was half-empty, making everything feel naked, stripped down to the skeleton, the whole world stone hard and dangerous.

At least the Tiran food was growing on Razo. The pastry chef had taken to him like a mother, plying him with bowls of cold beans and red bacon, chilled fish soups, and fig cakes. That was something. For a week he ate, lounged, and waited for something to happen. The diversion from tension was a relief.

Then it got boring. So Razo decided to get sandals.

"Do you think it wise to lose all your Bayern garb?" asked Talone.

"When Lady Megina saw my new clothing, she thought it paid a compliment to the Tiran, said I looked like walking peace."

"She did? Sometimes she surprises me." Talone rubbed his chin. "So far, it seems our presence hasn't made a dent in the hatred for Bayern, and I don't like the thought of you out there in the city alone. But you're right, we can't do much good locked up here. Be careful."

Razo found Enna and Finn holed up her room, enjoying a curious little wind that spun around them like a beast pacing its cage.

"Are you sure you two won't come? Think of it—*sandals,*" Razo said provocatively.

"Why step into that blaze and be drenched in sweat?" Enna leaned back on her hands and smiled. Her black hair swirled, her tunic and skirt flapped as though with glee. Over the past month, she had spent nearly every day as Megina's attendant at scores of dinners with assembly members, and she had declared that if the summer heat chased away all those droning fancy folk, then it was welcome. Of course, it was easy for her to smile at the heat

when she had wind on hand to shoo it off. Razo let the breeze suck the sweat from his brow before dragging himself away.

Out in the streets, the morning heat struck him like a blacksmith's hammer. He held the edge of his lummas over his black hair as the Tiran often did to protect themselves from the sun, though he did it to hide.

He had never been alone in the city. For the first few blocks, the freedom was exhilarating, but the farther he walked from Thousand Years, the more exposed he felt. By the time he reached the heart, his sick stomach and tired pulse made him wish he had not come.

"The heart," Ingridan citizens called the assembly building and surrounding squares. It was the center of Ingridan, the hub of order, business, and law, and it thrummed with activity at any hour. Victar had claimed that a member of each Ingridan household passed through the heart at least once each day, if not on business, then just to gather gossip.

The cobbler's stall reeked enough to make his eyes sweat, so Razo jumped into business, choosing deep brown leather and a style that wrapped up his ankle. Soon he was shod in fresh sandals and wriggling his toes, terribly pleased, until he recognized the man browsing the front of the shop from one of the formal banquets at Thousand Years. It was the prince.

He was around Geric's age and had a round face and thin arms. His neck was laden with ropes of amber beads, his fingers alight with rings, the kind of showy richness that made Razo sniff. Several men and women surrounded him, young and old, their hair darker than most Tiran, their skin a richer tone.

Long live His Radiance, Veran's murderer had exclaimed.

The city seemed massive and the palace painfully far away. He was just one rather squat boy alone in his enemy's city. What did he think he could possibly do?

Isi was just one girl, he reminded himself. *And she changed Bayern.*

"Excuse me, you're the prince," said Razo.

The prince smoothed the embroidered edge of his tunic. "So I am! And if I'm not mistaken by your accent, you are Bayern."

Razo's heart sped up, his blood felt slippery in his veins, but he let the lummas drop to his shoulders. "Yes, pleasure to meet you. Um, should I bow?"

"Most people do. On second thought, why bother now? Let us pretend that you already did."

“All right.” Razo paused. “That was a nice bow I gave you.”

“Indeed it was,” said the prince with enthusiasm. “And what luck! I have been itching to talk to a Bayern for weeks, and here you are. I have a certain question I must ask. Have you or anyone you know ever . . . eaten a baby?” His eyebrows twitched up with interest.

“No, Bayern don’t eat babies.” Razo spoke loudly enough that all the prince’s companions might hear. “Not baby *people,* at any rate, though I don’t mind a chicken egg or two, cooked right. . . .”

“Ha! I didn’t think so. Rupert owes me a tithe. He bet me, you see.”

“I’ve been asked about the baby thing a lot.”

“I’m sure you have. Well, farewell.” He turned away from the shop.

“Wait, um, uh, prince? Do you mind if I walk with you? Around? For a bit?”

The prince paused, and his innocent surprise made Razo believe no one had ever made such a request of him before. “I . . . I suppose so. What is your name?”

“Razo. Of Bayern’s Own. And thanks, Prince . . . um, I don’t think I’ve actually ever heard your name.”

“I don’t have one. My mother gave me a nursery name, but no one else will call me anything but Radiance until I wed and my wife grants me a household name.”

“Truly?” A man without a name. Razo’s thoughts were lost in that maze.

They emerged into the vicious sunlight, the prince’s entourage pushing them forward on the breeze of their fans. Razo kept glancing back, worrying that one of the prince’s guards would cut his throat in the first shady alley, until he saw that none bore a sword.

“Why don’t your guards wear weapons?” he asked, too curious to play cautious.

“The Wasking are my friends, not my guards! No one will harm the prince’s body. It would mean shame and ruin to them, their children, their grandchildren, their great-grandchildren . . . Celi, do you remember how many greats? Hm? . . . Well, no matter. Unless, that is, *you* mean me harm. Have you ever used that sword of yours to kill?”

The prince looked at him, his eyes a sudden intense, cold blue.

“Yes, in the war,” Razo said, adding hurriedly, “But I’d rather not do it ever again.”

“Is that so? It was a shame, that whole war business.”

Razo schooled his expression to the sleek indifference he'd been practicing.

The prince leaned forward, concerned. "Are you all right? Your face appears to be turning red, your eyebrows twitching—"

"I'm fine, just the heat, you know." Razo cleared his throat. "So, um, what did you think about that whole war business, anyway?"

"Mm? Seems a waste, but of course, it's not my concern."

"But you're the prince . . ."

"So I am." He smoothed his tunic again, looking newly pleased, as though he had fallen into the title only that morning. "And I am not a member of the assembly. Only they have the power to pass laws, execute criminals, and declare war. Across centuries, the assembly has whittled down the prince's power. Now all I do is bits of public finery, open and close assembly sessions, and such and so. . . ." He stooped to inspect a merchant's display of inlaid wooden boxes. "Oh, and I may choose my own bride. Tiran princes have always used their choice to maneuver current politics. My grandfather married a noble widow from Circuna, an eastern province that rumbled of secession—Circuna is still unified with Tira. My mother was the sister of an assemblyman, and after she married the prince my father, her brother became chief of assembly."

"Or you could marry for love," said Razo.

The prince smiled at an elderly man and woman, both squat and pleasantly round, walking hand in hand. "But how could I waste my only political power? Ah-ha, you think I am being overly candid, don't you, Razo's-Own?"

"It's actually just Razo, of Bayern's—"

"But I speak nothing that is not voiced in Ingridan's taverns. Not that I frequent the taverns. Too cramped, too crowded." They were strolling the amber market, and merchants held up bits of jewelry, offering gifts to the prince. "My people love me from afar. I hire as my companions people who are not *my* people." The prince gestured to the group walking in two neat lines behind them. "They're from the Wasking Islands and have such musical accents. Simply splendid!"

Razo glanced back and lowered his voice. "Do the Wasking hate Bayern, too?"

"Hate Bayern?" the prince said too loudly. "Of course not. And Tiran don't hate Bayern, either. The war was just some nonsense thought up by

disgruntled nobles. Ah, I can tell from your twitching face that you don't believe me. I'll prove it to you, Razo's-Own. Tomorrow night you will celebrate the feast of the watermelon harvest with us. When my city sees its prince with a Bayern lad, they will embrace you."

"But, Radiance, someone did kill one of my comrades on the palace grounds, and—"

"Yes, yes, I heard." The prince waved his hand impatiently. "But that was last spring. Summer is the season of the prince."

The prince turned his profile as though posing for a portrait. Behind his Wasking friends, Razo spied a couple of Tiran men, following close, their eyes on the Bayern lad.

14

Watchers in White

It rained the next day, rinsing the dust from the air and shoving all the heat indoors. Razo squandered several hours playing sticks with Conrad and wondering, hoping, that the weather might delay the festival and keep him alive a few more hours. But that afternoon, the rain stopped suddenly as though the sky had swallowed. The storm-cleaned city looked sharp enough to prick a finger.

"Nothing for it," Razo told Talone. "I said I'd go with the prince, and if I don't stick close to him, how'll I ever find out if he ordered the murders?"

When the sun set, Razo fell in with the prince's party at the palace gates, and they flowed down the streets toward the heart. Wet stones glistened silver under starlight, and the heat held its breath. People opened their doors and shutters, pulled chairs and tables outside, and gossiped with neighbors as they ate, serenaded by a crooked moon.

The prince was called to every table, and he grinned and huzzahed, waved and wished all well, stopped to sample every fish and soup, each cake and melon, praising them as he would a lady's beauty. And the people's gazes worshipped him. Most avoided looking at Razo at all. A few glared.

Razo's stomach cramped against the food, and he kept circling as he walked, watching for knives in shadows, hints of violence in strangers' eyes. Often he saw someone dressed in plain white, watching him from across the street. As the night progressed, the watcher changed, but someone was always there. Razo eyed the prince. If His Radiance noticed the watchers, if he knew them, Razo could not tell.

Eventually the idea of dawn poured dark blue into the black sky. The prince regaled café diners with outrageous stories Razo had told him, and Razo slumped in a chair, drunk with sleepiness and exhausted from being

afraid. The watcher had been absent for an hour or more, and Razo had relaxed his spine, so it took him too long to notice the new men gathering on the fringe of the prince's party and the wildness in their eyes.

"Radiance," said Razo, standing up. "Radiance, I think I'd—"

"What's a Bayern boy doing at a sacred Tiran festival?" When the man spoke, the laughter cut short. Glances shifted to Razo. "He's of a murdering kind. Who among you opens the chicken coop and invites the fox in?"

The owner of the café shifted guiltily. "He came with the prince."

"Lies!" said another, a man of middle age with the look of a professional soldier. "Even if you've all gone soft, we won't forget. Manifest Tira!"

"Manifest Tira!" the other men shouted. "Long live His Radiance!"

Razo fumbled for his sling, but the men pounced too quickly, two standing at his sides, pinning his arms down, one at his feet to keep his legs still, the other behind him, his hands squeezing Razo's neck. Razo's breathing broke, and soft black shapes crumbled around the edge of everything.

"Stop!" said the prince.

The hands relaxed, and Razo's breath screamed back into his lungs.

"Radiance, this is your enemy," said the strangler, his voice passionate but eerily calm. "Let me exterminate your enemies. Let me cleanse this city."

"He is my friend." The prince was standing, but he did not move forward, made no aggressive gesture. He appeared almost relaxed.

"The Bayern boy has tricked you, Radiance. He plots your death." Again, his hand squeezed air out of Razo.

"I said, he is my friend!" The prince spoke with urgency now, looking around at the people. "And the prince's friend requires your protection."

There was the barest hesitation, a trembling of indecision, before the crowd sprang.

"Get your hands off!"

"What do you think, attacking the prince's friend?"

"You shame us."

They tore Razo free and beat back the Manifest Tira fanatics until they fled into a side street. The café owner shook his head.

"I am sorry, Radiance."

The prince patted his shoulder. After a moment his face changed, brightening with the rim of the sun crossing the horizon. "Well! That was a

feast day to remember. A good tussle in the streets pumps the blood, doesn't it?" He laughed heartily. "I think my city needs sleep now. Thank you all! Huzzah!"

A carriage opened, and the prince gestured to Razo that he should ride with him.

Razo sat in silence, rocked nearly to sleep by the motion, the gloom of staying out all night weighing his head. He wondered if his throbbing neck would bruise impressively and if the pastry girls would notice. The thought did not cheer him as much as he thought it should.

"In front of me, right in front of me they attack you." The prince rubbed his eyes, dazed, as if wondering if he were dreaming. "I never imagined . . ."

Razo shrugged. "It's probably my own fault. I'm always trying to wiggle into narrow places."

"But *with* me . . ."The prince shook his head. "I wish I knew of a way to make a change."

Razo wondered if he should just let this go, just walk away as he should have with Tumas. The city was too dangerous, the prince not easy to trust. But what if the prince could do something? What if Razo could help him bend Tiran opinion? He swallowed his fear and said, "Maybe I could keep going out in the city with you, maybe if the people get used to seeing a Bayern with their prince . . ."

"Yes, of course! Well thought, Razo's-Own." The prince snuggled back in the carriage seat, already cheered out of his dejection. "You will see. Ingridan will yet show her true colors."

Colors, thought Razo, and began to hatch what he hoped was a very promising idea.

15

Brighter Colors

The next morning, Razo asked Talone if he could be assigned to the prince for the summer.

"You think he may be ordering the burnings," said Talone, slicing his sword along a whetstone.

"I don't know. After Enna I don't dare think twice in the same spot. If he tells the truth, then he doesn't have enough power. Most of the time his thoughts don't go deeper than his tongue, but maybe he'd be useful. . . ." Razo tried to wrestle impressions into words. "Everywhere we went, everyone was looking at him like he was an almond cake. He mayn't have power, but . . ."

"But the people love him and watch him. The people's opinion influences the assembly, and when they renew session for autumn, the assembly will vote if Tira returns to war. Very well." Talone's sword screeched in sharpening. "Lady Megina has tried to meet with the prince, but he seems to avoid any activity that smells of politics. Go see what you can do."

The prince's apartment was one open chamber, claiming the entire fifth story of the main palace wing. Razo passed Wasking men and women, dodged pillars, ducked beneath torrents of hanging fabric, and cawed back at a caged bird that screeched, "By your leave! By your leave!" He finally found the prince in a courtyard at the chamber's center, surrounded by potted fruit trees and flowering vines.

"It is Razo's-Own!" said the prince, jumping up. "I told Nom, I do not think he will come, and Nom said I might send a messenger, and I said I did not know how and never mind, let's go out on the porch, and if he does not come today, then he won't be welcome, because I am not a patient man and I cannot wait a week. It is my season, after all. So let's be off!"

Within half an hour they were strolling the restless market.

“Rupert, my old tutor, bet me another tithe that if the Bayern don’t eat babies, at least they don’t keep their word. And, ha-ha! He was wrong again. How I love it when Rupert is wrong.”

“Me too,” said Razo.

“Rupert cannot come to the market with us, for if he moves too much, his bones might break. Look, a new shipment of amber is in!”

Razo spent several hours in the numbing heat of the market, anticipating his own sudden murder, and questioning if this mindless outing really was ensuring peace.

At last he spotted what he’d been hoping to find—a merchant tendering pouches of Bayern dyes. He was Wasking, bearing a shaggy head of black hair and skin like honeyed wine. The merchant sat in a sad little cart with a rodent-gnawed cloth to screen the sun, its legs so crooked that if it had been a horse, its owner would have offered it a quick and compassionate death.

“No demand for goods from the north,” he said, avoiding even the name of the kingdom.

The prince frowned. Razo purchased a few pouches.

Razo spent two weeks accompanying the prince to the docks and market, theater and music hall, and no burned bodies popped up. The heat seemed to have chased the murderer into hiding, but Manifest Tira stayed like the stones. Often he could hear one of their number orating in Speaker’s Corner. “Why should we roll over and lick Bayern’s hand? Their presence here dirties us and distracts us from our destiny. Tira is the greatest country in the world, and one day our borders will stretch north and west. . . .”

The summer heat built like the tension before a tavern brawl, until it finally exploded into rain. Razo gathered his Tiran-made clothing and Bayern dyes and ran through the storm to the kitchen to borrow their pots.

“You’ve been away,” said Pela with pouting lips.

“I’ve got this new friend. . . .”

“We know,” said the freckled girl. It’s the prince.”

“And all of Ingridan knows you were attacked,” said the girl with smooth hair.

“What’s all of Ingridan saying?” Razo asked.

“That Bayern or no, people had no right attacking anyone under the prince’s protection.”

Progress, Razo thought.

He pulled a thin, pale blue scarf out of his stone pouch and wound it around the pastry chef's neck. "The prince was going to toss it, said I could have it if I wanted. It's called silk."

The chef fingered the fabric and blushed, and the girls oohed and whistled. When she saw Razo's bundle of clothes and packs of dyes, she insisted on helping him, and soon many of the girls were lending a hand, though none could fathom why he would want to ruin the beautiful white fabric.

A few hours later, Razo climbed into the freshly dyed and dried orange pants, long yellow tunic, and red lummas. He felt like the birds for sale in the market, the ones from Wasking with different-colored heads, wings, and tails, and he was betting that the prince would be intrigued.

The afternoon still thundered when Razo climbed the stairs to the top floor of the main palace wing and the prince's personal apartment. He said hello to his Wasking friends reading by the door, swiping from them a piece of cracker bread for his favorite caged bird (the one he'd trained to shriek, "Razo the great!"). All the windows were covered in thick-slatted shutters, allowing air in and keeping most of the rain out. The prince was lazing on a peach-colored pillow, looking horribly bored. As soon as he saw Razo, he bolted upright.

"What are you wearing?"

"My clothes," Razo said impressively. "Touched with the Bayern dyes. Now they look proper, except they pinch. . . . Maybe the dyes shrink fabric a bit? Don't know why everyone in this country drags themselves along in white all the time. White's only good for funerals and weddings. No Bayern right in the head feels at home in—"

"I want that, Nom." The prince pointed at Razo and spoke to the tall Wasking man.

"You wish your clothing dyed like the Bayern boy's, Radiance?" asked Nom, his accent smooth as water over stones. "Very well."

The prince beamed. "What a noise we'll make among the drab and dull, how we'll . . .Wait, I want more green. I hope I did not imply I only wanted your colors. We can't turn a cold shoulder to green, and blue, and purple, for the sake of all ordered things, how can you dismiss purple? Celi, call Nom back and tell him of my need for purple!"

That week, Razo brought Enna and Finn into the city for the festival of seven rivers, and with his friends by his side, he felt safer than he had in

weeks. They laughed and ate all day aboard the prince's boat on the Tumult, the river so crowded with wooden crafts banging and scraping one another that they could scarcely spot any water. The prince was elated to have three whole Bayern in his party.

"Look at their hair!" the prince shouted to passing boats. "Black as pitch. And such salty accents. Marvelous!"

Enna took Razo aside, whispering in his ear, "He's kind of odd, isn't he? I mean, are you the only friend he doesn't pay?"

"He pretends not to be lonely," Razo whispered. "Enna, when you write to Isi next, tell her the prince here needs a wife. If he marries a Bayern woman, it might help sway more Tiran to our side."

"Huzzah!" the prince shouted from the deck of the boat. He was dressed in one long tunic, purple from shoulders to ankles, with a river-blue lummas running across his chest and flung over his forearm. Every time someone remarked on his new clothing, the prince mentioned "those dashing Bayern dyes."

The prince kept wearing his colors all summer. Razo's heart thumped the first time he noticed a Tiran woman in the market wearing a bright green lummas over her hair. A few days later at the music hall, Enna counted five dyed lummas cloths in the audience. By the next feast day, the rickety stall of the Wasking merchant had transformed into a sturdy structure—steps up, a planked floor, extravagant shade. The merchant had combed his hair and broadened his smile.

By the time the summer heat got lazy and let the wind from the ocean tear it into strands, and the nobles tottered back dusty and bored of country life, one in ten citizens had cast off their white and pale hues for the darker, richer tones of Bayern.

"There's number twenty-two—yellow!" said Megina, watching the street from a window and counting dyed lummas cloths. "I can send our traders back for more dyes and other Bayern goods at last. The queen was right—trading will make peace more plausible. You surprised me, Razo."

Razo squelched a pleased grin. "I watched you that time you had dinner with the chief of assembly, how you didn't try to convince him that Bayern's good and innocent. You were just friendly. At the time, I thought you weren't so smart, but that's all I tried to do with the prince. Look, there's twenty-three. . . ."

Razo stopped, realizing the orange he saw entering the palace gates belonged not to a dyed lummas, but to a girl's hair.

A queer crush in his chest felt both painful and exciting. Dasha was back. Summer was over. The darkness that had clutched at him all spring and been stifled by the summer heat now seemed to crouch and wait, ready to pounce again.

16

Razo's Luck

The banquet hall rose three stories, and the shadows swayed and crept under the light of a thousand oil lamps. To Razo's mind, the crossing and snapping of light and shadow made the walls feel alive and crawling, the room tangled in spiderwebs.

Then the food arrived, and Razo was distracted from dread—pork skewers, bowls of sweet onions, cucumbers, and watermelon deliciously chilled. Would that the assembly renewed session every night to celebrate with such a feast.

"Ingridan food isn't so bad," he said. "Or am I just getting used to it?"

"You'd eat a plate and call it pleasantly crunchy," said Enna.

Finn just nodded. His mouth was full.

Razo's idea of paradise was a place where the pigs ran around already roasted, and that night he wondered if he might actually be dead. The pork was tender in the middle and seared on the outside, the chunks of fat crispy. It almost brought a tear to the eye.

Razo was on his ninth skewer when the chief of assembly called out for music. Dasha complied, sitting on a cushion in the center of the hall, a harp on her lap, and coaxed a song from the strings. Razo stopped eating. The music jabbed and tugged as though she plucked at his organs. It seemed a lullaby, but one that made the hairs on his neck feel like pressing needles. He hated for it to stop.

How could she know which string she touched with her eyes closed? Razo stared, fascinated, until Talone approached Razo's table and knelt behind Megina.

"Lady . . ."He spoke just loudly enough that Razo could catch his words if he leaned forward. "Lord Belvan just informs me that his men found two

burned bodies outside our barracks. They have taken the bodies away from Thousand Years to be buried secretly."

Razo's eyes roved the room—Ledel's men back from the country and lounging at their banquet table, Dasha at her harp, Belvan near the prince, and the assembly members in white tunics crossed with red sashes like long scratches on pale skin.

"Thank you, Captain." Megina's voice was steady but full of breath. "Lord Belvan must indeed be a champion for peace."

"As well, he told me something curious—a merchant complained about a ruckus in the warehouse district during the festival yesterday when all business should have been halted. Belvan's men investigated this morning and found the place empty but for heaps of freshly burned crates. They know of no reason for the oddity."

Maybe it's not a fire-speaker, thought Razo. *Maybe the murderer's burning his victims in a warehouse bonfire before tossing them outside our barracks*.

"Captain, was Lord Belvan able to identify the bodies?" Razo asked.

"No. And though he hopes to keep the public unaware of it, he'll have to report to the assembly. We have just two weeks before they vote about a return to war."

Razo set down a ceramic mug, cracking the handle, and realized he was spitting angry. *Why kill? Just to frame us? And who's the burner burning? Murders don't make sense. Why not just cause random fires and blame them on Bayern? Why go so far as murder?* His head felt bloated and throbbed with too many questions. So what that he knew who had ink-stained hands when he could not shake anything into sense?

While most of the banqueters stretched and staggered out, Razo lingered over watermelon rinds and dishes of minty honey crystals. He was keeping an eye on Dasha, who after chatting with two ladies in the hall at last strolled his way.

"Hello, tree rat." Dasha sat beside him and began to pick through the remains of the feast. "I wondered when you were going to come talk to me."

"You did?"

"Mm-hmm," she said as she finished a slice of cucumber. "You do drag your feet. I have been away for weeks and weeks, and all you can do is sit there and stare."

“I wasn’t staring at you. . . .”

“You weren’t? I thought you were.” She studied an empty bowl. “So you were ignoring me.”

“No, I wasn’t.” His head felt even thicker than before, and he rubbed his eyes. “I was looking at you a lot, just not, you know, *staring,* necessarily.”

“And . . . ?”

“And what?”

She sighed. “And what did you think?”

She wants a compliment, he thought, pleased that he was catching on so quickly.

“*And* you look really pretty with your hair up like that, prettiest girl in here tonight.”

Dasha’s smile took a long time spreading from one corner of her mouth to the other. “So, you were looking. Well, thank you, but I meant, what did you think about the song I played?”

Razo stared hard at the short rope of pearls around her throat, commanding his face to be still, not to show any color, not to betray his utter humiliation with so much as an eyebrow twitch.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “You look as though you’re in pain.”

“Just a strained . . . toe. *Ahem.* Anyway, that’s what I meant, that you looked pretty while playing the harp. You *sounded* pretty.”

“Thank you.” She hooked a finger in her pearls, the action reminding Razo to look up. “I wanted to talk to you about the Bayern and how the situation has been over the summer. Do you have time tomorrow morning?”

“Yes,” said Razo without hesitation.

“I thought we could go riding through the heart.”

“Good,” said Razo, thinking that riding in a public place would be safer.

“On second thought, how about by the ocean?”

“You’re right, that would be better,” said Razo, now realizing that anywhere too public might be even more dangerous. He straightened for whatever she might say next, and no matter what it was, he was ready to agree.

Then he went cold, as if all his blood drained out of him from his head through his boots. He was ready to agree. No matter what she said. *She has people-speaking.*

Isi had told him about people-speaking, how it was a talent like Enna’s fire and wind speech. He had been around people-speakers before—they

were charming and persuasive, yet they planted an uncomfortable sensation in Razo's mind, made him itch where he could not reach. And they had been safe only once they were dead.

"Perhaps if you liked we could—"

"I, uh, I should go," he interrupted, standing and knocking an empty platter to the floor. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Razo scuttled away. He had barely fled the uncertain lamplight of the banquet hall for a dark corridor when a hand grabbed him and pulled him against a wall.

"Pela," said Razo like a sigh of relief. "I thought you were Tumas at first. What're you doing?"

"I baked this special for you." Pela stood close to him, holding a pastry in both hands. She smiled, her two bunches of yellow hair bobbing.

"Uh, thanks, but I . . ." He was about to make an excuse why he could not take it, but she looked so much like a rabbit, cute and pathetic at once, he could not bear to hurt her. "But I don't have anything for *you.* But thanks."

He examined it as he walked away, and despite having just gorged at a banquet, his stomach burbled gleefully. It was his favorite kind of turnover —flaky crust, pears and syrup oozing out, with some dark red berries he'd never seen before. He raised it to his lips but stopped. Somehow accepting a gift from lap-sitting Pela felt like lying behind Dasha's back.

Probably her people-speaking power over me, thought Razo. He was passing by the kennels and tossed the tartlet to a large brown dog, who snapped it out of the air and gulped it whole.

The next morning, Razo wheedled Finn and Enna up early, begging their company, and they followed him to the stable, yawning, pillow marks still imprinted on their cheeks. They sat on their horses and waited at the Bayern stables for Dasha.

"Enna, you've spent more time with a people-speaker than I have—"

"Ick. I really don't want to think about that. Ever again."

"I know"—Razo craned around, trying to spot Dasha among the early-morning errand runners—"but if Dasha's one of them, then it might explain how she's able to move the bodies around, you know, persuading others to do stuff for her. She doesn't seem like a murderer, but the people-speakers I knew can seem so friendly and innocent and pretty and—"

“Hello!” Dasha rode up on a gray stallion, her orange hair in two neat braids. She wore white trousers with her tunic, and her lummas was dyed a dazzling Bayern turquoise, making her eyes appear the same bright color. “Are Enna and Finn joining us? What fun! I brought plenty of victuals”—she patted a basket tied behind her saddle—“so shall we go?”

She tapped her mount forward. Razo glared at Bee Sting when she followed without a prompt.

They rode through twisting side streets, Dasha begging details of what the city had been like during the blistering summer months. Razo could not speak fast enough, could not leap forward quickly enough whenever she wanted a thing, and could not pass Finn and Enna enough meaningful looks over his shoulder.

They were sitting on a blanket in the sand, watching the surf stroke the shore, when Dasha held up her hands and laughed, as pleased as a fish in a stream. “I am stickier than a stickle bush, I’m so drenched in peach juice.” She hopped up to rinse off her hands.

“So, am I right?” he whispered as soon as Dasha was beyond earshot.

Finn shrugged.

“There’s something wrong with her, no doubt,” said Enna.

“I knew it!”

“No, no, I mean something else. . . . Ugh, I wish I were better at wind-speaking. Isi would be able to tell. I don’t think she’s a fire-speaker. The heat *is* different around her, somehow. . . . But nothing makes me think she’s a people-speaker. What makes you—”

“How could you miss it? Just the sound of her voice makes my chest feel tight, and my face gets hot and my mouth goes dry whenever she’s near. It’s getting so bad, all I have to do is see her and I’m already thinking, What does she want? What can I do for her? She’s got some power over me, there’s no question, and what else could it be?”

There was a heavy pause, then Enna burst out laughing. Finn smiled at his boots.

“What, what?” Razo looked back and forth wildly. “What did I miss?”

Enna rolled her eyes. “This is delicate, and I’ll admit that I’m not at my best when things are delicate.” She stood and stretched. “I’ll go help Dasha scrape off the stickiness. Finn, would you . . . ?” She gestured at Razo with her head.

“What is it?” Razo asked when Enna was gone. “If you and Enna knew that Dasha was an enemy all along and kept me ignorant for your own amusement . . .”

Finn balked at speaking, even more than normal, and kept running a finger on the inside of his collar as if his shirt scratched his neck. “It’s just . . . have you thought, Razo, that maybe what you were talking about isn’t because she has people-speaking, but might be that you’re, you know . . .” He looked at Razo hard, his eyes unblinking.

Razo was about to explode with impatience because he did not know and this game was getting dull and . . . then he knew. The thought rushed him like wildfire hitting an autumn wheat field. He felt his face burn, and he shook his head casually as if he did not know, then wished he had not, because Finn was forced to actually say it aloud.

“. . . falling in love with her.”

Razo’s voice stuck in his throat. He coughed. “I . . . uh, that’s just, that’s . . .”

“I found another in my saddlebag!” said Dasha, returning with a fig-and-egg cake in hand.

Enna was behind her, and whatever expression Razo had plastered on his face made her turn her back and double over in hysterics.

“Are you all right?” Dasha’s look skipped to each person. “What did I miss?”

“Didn’t you hear it?” asked Razo with some pressure in his voice. “Enna just let out some serious gas. That was coarse, Enna-girl, and not funny a whit.”

Finn snorted once as though trying very hard not to laugh. Enna’s chuckle stopped short, and she glared back at Razo.

Razo shrugged, his mouth miming, “What?”

Only when the party was mounted and returning up the beach, Finn and Enna in the lead, did Razo let his attention return to Dasha. She was watching the sea, her gaze lost where the horizon was misty. With the conversation hushed, the sound of waves pierced him again as it had the first time, whispered an ache of loneliness, made him feel full of secrets. The way Dasha watched the water, he thought she would understand.

In love. That’d be just my luck.

Razo grumbled to himself as he stabled Bee Sting and ambled back to the barracks. There was a commotion around the kennels, and something was

lying on the ground. Razo thought if it was another burned body, he might as well cut his own throat. As he neared, he heard one man say to another, “Dead. Just up and died in the night. Wasn’t even sick yesterday.”

Razo slithered through the throng and saw—it was a large brown dog.

17

Daggers in the Assembly

Four days after the death of the dog, Razo paced outside the barracks. He had not returned to the pastry kitchen and had so far avoided Pela, though lately everything he ate tasted a little off. He hoped it was just his imagination. Now Thousand Years was abuzz with the gossip that two of Ledel's men had deserted after the last feast day. According to Ledel, the men had been enamored of a group called Manifest Tira. With new blood in their ranks, Razo suspected Manifest Tira would creep out and bite soon.

He should try to chase them down. But how? Were they the burners? Was Dasha involved? And how could he find out without hanging around her and confirming to Enna and Finn that he really was infatuated? The problem became harder and crunchier the longer he chewed, and he feared he might crack a tooth on it.

"Hello!"

Startled, Razo took two steps back, his heels hit a stone, and he fell on his backside. Dasha stood over him, as pleased as if she were looking at a litter of bunnies.

"I scared you! I never scare anyone."

"No?" Razo hopped back up and adopted a posture that said he was completely unruffled, never had been, and in fact was ready to do something manly like lift boulders or swallow live worms. "You frighten me regularly."

"Would you say I'm terrifying?" She lifted one eyebrow.

"Alarming, at the very least."

"Oh, good." She hooked her arm through his and began to walk, easily knocking his composure off its feet, until he noticed that her shoulder was touching the top of his arm and he could see the part in her hair. He was taller than Dasha. His gait turned into a swagger.

“And where’re we going?”

“The assembly. They asked for Lady Megina today, and you’re the first Bayern I came across.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know, but when the chief of assembly calls, you don’t dawdle.”

It was past midday when all the Bayern gathered, entered carriages, and made the slow, bouncy ride into the heart. The scene around the assembly was calm and quick in the supple heat of early autumn, the sky a bottomless blue. The ambassador promenaded across the plaza, smiling and waving. Razo felt raw and exposed, missing the protection of the prince.

The door guard outside the assembly collected swords, daggers, and slings. A Tiran man pushed his way in front of Dasha. He was perhaps twenty years old, with hair cut short, his robes sharply white. Razo took him for some assembly member’s aide who had taken too long on an errand. When the door guard asked for his weapon, the man held up his arms to show that he wore no sword. There appeared to be something darker than his white robes at his waist beneath his lummas, but Razo decided it was just a fold in the fabric.

Talone ordered Enna to stay with half of Bayern’s Own outside. He did not trust the assembly door guard to keep back any armed fanatics who might try to come in after the ambassador. Finn, Razo, and the Own’s best grapplers, including Conrad, accompanied the captain inside.

The walls of the assembly were curved, high windows piercing the white stone dome. The sixty assemblymen and -women in white robes and scarlet sashes sat on rows of steps that wrapped around the chamber. When the door minister announced Megina, the current debate paused. All faces turned to see the Bayern, then outcries arose like birds startled from a wheat field.

“Something’s not right,” said Talone, reaching for the sword that was not there.

The chief of assembly stood in the speaking circle at the lowest point of the room. “Quiet, please. Lady Megina, why have you come?”

“Lady Dasha gave me a message, saying you requested my presence.”

“I am here, honored chief,” said Dasha, stepping forward. “The message came from your aide, Tophin, just after the third bell.”

“I apologize, Ambassador, for your inconvenience,” said the chief of assembly, “but I sent no message.”

“How odd. But as I am here, may I take this opportunity to address the assembly?”

The chief stepped aside, offering the circle.

“Lady Megina, we should go,” Talone said in a low warning.

“We have less than two weeks before they vote,” Megina whispered. “I can’t pass up this chance.” She began to descend the wide, shallow steps.

No sooner was she beyond Talone’s reach than two men rushed forward, coming between the ambassador and her guards. One shoved Talone, knocking him back against the steps. Razo reached for the man, his fingers just grazing his tunic. The other man had already gained the circle, and he pulled a short dagger from his side, seizing Megina around her waist.

Talone hollered, and the Bayern leaped forward. The first thug pulled his dagger and shook it at them.

“Stay back! We will speak, and you will hear us or she dies.”

It was the young man who had pushed through the line. Razo cursed his own stupidity. The assassination of an ambassador was something even those Bayern eager for peace would not be able to ignore.

“This assembly is disgraced by harboring enemy spies and kissing our brothers’ murderers,” said the first villain.

They were walking Megina up a set of stairs, apparently seeking a wall at their backs. Razo scanned the chamber. When the ambassador and her captors reached the top, they would be directly below a ledge. Razo started toward it till he glimpsed Talone with Conrad and another grappler, climbing a pillar. Razo stayed back, thinking he would only get in their way.

“We will be heard! We will not allow Tira to fall in with thieves—” One of the men’s sandals squeaked on a marble stair that was suddenly wet. He slipped, regained his feet, and slipped again. Razo wondered how that particular stone came to be wet but thought it awfully lucky. The slip bought Talone a little more time. Razo peeked toward Talone, gauging the progress in their climb, and caught a glimpse of Dasha. Her face was intense, almost pained.

“The vile enemy . . . ,” the villain screeched. “Our murderers are not our neighbors. . . .”

His voice was building, higher and louder, as though he would come to some climax, and soon. Talone was still out of sight. Razo did not think Megina could wait.

The door guard had taken his sword, his javelin, his bag of stones, and his short sling from his side, but his long-distance sling still cinched his waist like a belt. An elderly assemblyman beside him was clutching a cane topped with a wooden ball as big as a fist.

"Excuse me," said Razo, snatching the cane. He broke it over his knee.

The assassin was canting in a voice rubbed raw, building in pitch, coming to the end. "We make this sacrifice . . ."

The sling felt cumbersome with the cane knob in its leather pouch, the target too close for a distance sling. His hands shaking, he wrapped a length of the sling around his wrist to shorten it. The villain was angling the dagger to Megina's throat. Razo swung once and released.

The knob hit the assassin on the cheek. He screamed, let go of Megina, and fell over, his hands cradling his face. The second villain's dagger did not have time to fall. Talone dropped from the ledge onto the man's back, shoving him to the ground. Conrad followed, wrestling the dagger from Talone's man, the other grappler securing the wounded man. Finn rushed forward, putting Megina behind him.

"And on the very steps of our assembly chamber . . . ," whispered the old man.

The Bayern were quiet as they rode back to Thousand Years. Razo watched Dasha, and she watched the carriage window. The assembly guards were hunting Tophin, the chief's aide, who had disappeared. Razo wondered if his body would show up burned.

Lord Belvan and Talone led the bound, would-be assassins to the bowels of the palace for questioning, where the only light seeped from oily torches dripping smoke. Razo was at their heels. He needed to hear those men admit to the burnings.

At the door of the dark, stale chamber, Talone put a hand on Razo's chest.

"I'll help," said Razo.

"No, son, I'll do this myself."

Talone shut the door.

18

A Ram's-Head Ring

Razo found Talone two days later sitting on his bunk at the barracks, his forehead resting on his fist.

"Are you grayer than you were?" asked Razo, rubbing his own temples.

Talone smiled grimly, and Razo decided he would rather not know what had happened in that cell.

"I do not believe that they're the burners."

"Ah, Captain, don't tell me that. They've got to be!"

Talone shook his head. "I don't think so. They belong to that Manifest Tira group. One was former military and from a moderately wealthy family, the other a poor boy who felt cheated when the quick end to the war stole his chance to fight. Their confidence was frightening—they believe all of Tira will hail them as heroes for even attempting to kill the ambassador. They hate Bayern, no doubt, but a bungled assassination of the ambassador in the midst of the assembly is juvenile, desperate, clumsy. The burner is following a much more sophisticated plan."

"Aimed at the same results—a repeat of the war."

"Perhaps." Talone's voice was too tired to have emotion. "Manifest Tira claims that Tira is destined to inherit any nation that touches its borders, and war is the sacred means to claim that destiny. They are brash, fearless, like the soldier who flung himself into the Bayern barracks just to kill as many as he could before being killed himself. But the burner is shrouded, slow, and secretive, and seemingly murdering fellow Tiran just to incite hatred of Bayern. That's a different kind of evil. Smells like revenge to me, vengeance for a deep, ugly wound.

"This does not bode well for Megina, or any of us," said Talone, rubbing his eyes. "The burner attacks from the shadows, secretive, calculating. But Manifest Tira . . ."

“People know them,” said Razo. “They’re cousins and neighbors, and they’re out in the market saying vile things about Bayern. They couldn’t be a secret if the people of Ingridan didn’t choose to protect them.”

Talone nodded, his eyes closed. “Those two would not give up the names of their cohorts, but one did reveal the location of their meetings. Belvan’s men will have cleared out any lingering members of Manifest Tira by now. Even if they’re not the burners, they’re still a threat to our mission. I want you to take a look.”

Talone gave him directions to a warehouse on the western edge of the city and was half-asleep when he told him to be careful. Razo clicked the door shut under the sound of a snore.

He wore plain Tiran garb, the only bits that had as yet escaped the dye pots. The sky was vague with clouds still disputing the question of rain, but Razo shaded his head with his lummas and hoped no one would wonder why. He hopped in the back of a penny wagon through the heart, then made his way on foot past the pungent luxury of the spice market and the sour, stifled air of the slaughter district.

Sometimes his sandals flapped on the stones, echoing in alleyways, invoking the sound of someone following. Razo earned an ache in his neck from looking back so often. He was negotiating a fringe area of the city—weeds cracked through the cobblestones and tough green moss crawled under shadows, hinting that not all in Ingridan was scrubbed clean.

He thought he was lost and used that excuse to run, shake off the feeling of being followed. He scampered over four or five streets before discovering the Rosewater, the river that formed the city’s western border. It was thick with rubbish this far south, and the blue-tiled sides did little to brighten the waters. An occasional boat slid past, but all business was halted for the feast of cedar fires, and the day was as slow and sluggish as the clouds.

A couple of Belvan’s men milled outside the warehouse and gave Razo a nod of permission to enter. It was a one-story, thin structure and smelled like sodden wood, cheap and sad. The floor was littered with grubby straw, a few empty crates the only remnants of business before the warehouse became the meeting place of angry politics. Nothing looked burned. Razo pocketed a few scraps of paper and besides that found only a copper ring, cut straight and stamped with a ram’s head. It fit his left middle finger, so he slipped it on for safekeeping, recalling one like it on the man who killed

Veran. And now that he thought of it, he believed those two assassins also wore—

"Psst."

Razo had not expected to hear someone from behind. He held still, the hairs on his neck rising to listen. His left hand was up, the ring visible.

"Psst, there are guards out front. Where is—"

The voice cut short, perhaps doubting for the first time whom he was talking to. Razo turned, met eyes with a man of thirty, hair shorn, a copper ring on his left hand. When he saw Razo's face, he pulled a knife from his belt and charged.

Razo lowered his shoulder and rammed into the man's gut, forcing him to stumble back and giving Razo time to draw his sword.

"Hel—" Razo began to holler, but the man was upon him again, slicing the air with his dagger. Razo thrust with his sword; the man dodged, grabbed Razo's sword arm, and slashed his skin.

Razo exclaimed and dropped his sword at the slicing pain, but he managed to grab the man's arm, gripping fiercely until his arms shook with the effort of keeping that dagger one thumb away from his belly. He stepped back into his foe and bit down hard. He tasted blood before the man dropped his dagger. Razo elbowed behind him and heard a grunt but soon had two arms around his neck. He was brought down, unable to breathe.

He thrashed, he screamed, dry and silent. Through a crack in the door, he could see the back of one of Lord Belvan's men, casually standing guard. Tiny black dots played across his vision. Panic clawed at him, bony fingers pulling him down.

If you're going to win one blasted wrestle in your life, he thought, *this should be the one.*

Razo relaxed his whole body and closed his eyes so he would not have to see the going-black that meant he had no air. Then, pulling all his strength together, he whipped his head back. There was a crunch, and Razo laughed breathlessly that he was the one breaking noses for once.

Intoxicated by the air in his lungs, he leaped to his feet and stormed into the man. They locked arms. The man tried to trip him with a leg behind Razo's knee—an old trick. Razo managed to stay on his feet by crouching down, then shoved his head up into the man's chin. The man's jaw snapped shut. As he fell back, he kicked Razo in the gut. They both hit earth, Razo gagging at the pain in his belly, rasping for breath to call for help. The man

was crawling for his dagger. Razo lurched forward, throwing himself on the man's back, scrabbling to keep his foe from reaching the weapon.

"In here," said Razo, his voice chafing. He gulped for more air. "In here!"

Belvan's men peeked through the door, then ran in when they saw. The soldiers seized the attacker by his arms, allowing Razo to roll off his back onto the floor, slump against a crate, and breathe. Slowly, the black dots swam away.

"Another one?" asked one of Belvan's men.

"Climbed in a window, I guess," said Razo. "I thought I'd bought it, but I bested him in the end. Me, Razo, grappled down a bigger foe. Don't keep this one a secret, fellows."

The soldier sniffed. "And what should we do with him?"

"Uh, take him back to Captain Talone and Lord Belvan, would you? I'm going to keep poking around."

"You're bleeding."

Razo twisted his forearm, trying to get a good look. "That fellow had teeth, sure enough." The cut was not deep but might leave a striking scar. He tore a strip of his lummas cloth and wrapped the arm.

For some time after the soldiers and their prisoner left, Razo stayed put, his eyes half-closed. His solitude fastened around him.

Something rasped. Something else squeaked. Razo snatched up his sword, holding the weapon before him as he scoured the warehouse.

"Anybody home?" he called out, swinging at every mouse scratch or board creak. "I'm so lonely," he said in mock-timid tones to make himself laugh, but he glanced at the door once or twice, wishing he'd thought to ask one of Belvan's men to stick around.

He was sorting through the detritus of broken crates when movement outside made him look up. Fifty paces off, on the bank of the river, stood Tumas.

Razo dropped down, breathing so loudly that he was put to mind of his brother Jef snoring. His calves began to tremble from crouching, and he knew if Tumas found him here, far from watchful eyes, he'd break bones bigger than his nose. The waiting made him ache with impatience. After a time, he gave up thoughts of self-preservation as boring and scuttled to the doorway. No one there.

Calling himself a fine spy to hide instead of hunt, he ran toward the river, looking down every alley, glancing at every window. Near the place where he had first spotted Tumas, a narrow stairway tumbled into the water, joining a small dock. Had he rowed away?

Razo kept a careful three-pace distance from the edge while he walked, scanning the water, not watching where he stepped. His boot stuck something yielding.

The smell of burned bodies was becoming uncomfortably familiar to him now, a foul mix of baked meat, garbage fire smoke, and weakly built privies. He could taste the smell, and he spat over the side of the river.

The face was burned to black indistinction, the body nearly as brittle as charcoal. No jewelry, no indication of who the poor fellow was. In a second-story warehouse, Razo thought he saw the pale sheen of a face staring out, but when he looked, no one was there. He had to get rid of this in a hurry, before someone discovered a Bayern and a burned body together. With his feet, he rolled the corpse toward the water and sent it hurtling into the river below.

"Sleep well," he whispered. He hated the burner for forcing him to bury another person like that, with no family knowing where their child or sibling had gone to, with no mention of great deeds and loving friends, the body not embraced by earth but tumbling into the unsteady sea.

The squeak of a sandal brought Razo up. There she was, Dasha, standing so close that he was startled by her blue eyes when everything else was so dull—a leaden river under the sunless sky, a smudge of ash on gray stones. He took a step back from those eyes.

"Razo," she said.

There was something tight in her voice, and he wondered if she would admit it all. Just then, he could not bear to hear.

"It was you." He backed away from the thought and, like a fool, moved closer to the river. His heel bumped a stone, he stumbled, and then came the astonishing sensation of falling.

19

River Fingers

The tumble seemed to take hours, giving him time to realize he was falling a long way, to wonder if hitting the river below would hurt much. He imagined being carried away to the sea and meeting up with scores of burned corpses and generations of dead Tiran, all sitting on the sea floor, grinning their bare grins, motioning for him with naked hands.

Then the water struck his gut, and he could not have breathed even if there had been air. He flailed, wishing a scream. The water seized him and pulled him down.

Razo thrashed his way up once. His face scraped the surface, and he sucked in air and water. Dasha was running on the bank above him, not quite keeping pace with the river, and yelling at him to swim to the lower bank on the other side. Now he wanted to laugh. As if he could swim two paces, let alone across a river.

His clothes, his sword, and his bag of stones were as heavy as the world. His head went under. The water sang in his ears.

As the dark and cold and confusion lulled him, rocked him, he thought to feel embarrassed to be dying so easily, and in front of a pretty girl no less. His arms and legs still wrestled with the deep, but his mind was falling asleep.

A sudden lift startled him to gasp. He was on his back staring at the gray sky, wrenching air into lungs, coughing out water. Then he noticed that he was not floating downstream but gliding toward the opposite shore, like the waterbirds that propel themselves with wide, flat feet. Razo glanced at his own feet and saw his toes peek through his sandals. At least he was not a duck.

He thought he saw Dasha swimming some distance off, but when he turned to look, water gushed over his face, so he kept his face up and

focused on making certain he had plenty of that wonderful air.

His head bumped something hard, and he twisted around, somehow keeping afloat until his fingers grasped a tiled edge and he could pull himself up. The far bank of the river was built into a series of wide steps, so as the river rose and fell it would always meet an easy dock. Razo crawled away from the water and lay on a step, coughing his breath, his legs trembling. He could not quite believe he was alive.

A hand reached out of the water. Another. Dasha pulled herself up and sat where she was, her legs knee deep in the river. Her hair was straight and dripping, one tiny silver star clinging to a strand, the others washed away. She looked at him, her lips parted.

"Did you pull me?" Razo asked. "Is that how I made it across?"

Dasha did not answer. She turned to the river as if considering jumping back in.

A heavy gust wrapped around Razo's face and warned of more than wind to come. Darker clouds pushed through the gray ones, swirling and undulating as though the sky mirrored the river's waves.

"It's going to storm soon." Standing up, he felt like a newborn colt, shaking on unfamiliar legs. He searched for a bridge to take them back across the Rosewater and into the city, but no arch interrupted the slate water. When he started to climb the bank steps, Dasha did not follow. Now she was watching the sky.

"Come on, noble girl." He put his arm around her waist to lift her to her feet. "We've got to get away from the river. If it rains much and this wind gets tougher, we could be swept away."

She let him lead her. The wind grew more insistent, pushing them from behind. He scrambled up the steps and saw dark fields, the laborers absent for the feast day. A squarish shape in the distance was the only destination. Dasha's steps seemed reluctant, so Razo put his arm around her shoulders and made her run.

It was a small hut, rattling in the wind like chattering teeth and likely to crumble in on itself any day, but it was empty and had a roof, so Razo tore the knotted rope off the door and pulled Dasha inside.

Lightning sliced the gray; thunder hurled itself across the sky. There was a pause, as if the world took a deep breath, and then rain struck. The thin metal roof shuddered, the walls groaned once, and Razo leaned toward the

center of the room, uneasy with a storm that seemed intent on clawing its way inside.

He shrugged and chuckled at himself. It was just weather, nothing to get his boot straps tangled about. Then he looked at Dasha—pale, crouched on the floor. She was staring straight up. He could not help but follow her gaze, but nothing hung in the air above them.

"What ails you?" he asked.

"Did I do it?"

Razo's heart seemed to fall a long way. It *was* her. She had killed those people. The question in her voice encouraged him somewhat that she was innocent, in a way. In the way that Enna had been during the war, in the way that Finn forgave Enna.

"Did you mean to do it?"

Dasha looked at him. In the dim light, the blacks of her eyes nearly crowded out all the blue, giving her a startled expression. "Sometimes I do." She returned her gaze upward, opening her face and neck to the sound of rain. "I want to, the desire pulls me, and I can't help it . . . or I don't want to help it. I love it, though I didn't mean to do it this time."

The room seemed to slant now. Razo was backing away. "What do you mean, you love it? You love killing people?"

"Killing people?"

"I thought that you . . . I can't believe you enjoy it, I just didn't think . . ." An icy shiver scratched at his back, like the warning before he went too far taunting his big brother Brun. "So, you going to kill me next?"

"Kill you next? Razo, what—"

"Those bodies, that one by the river, you burned them."

"I did not! I found it there, just like you did."

"You said you loved it, but you didn't mean to—"

"I was talking about something else, just forget about it. . . ."

"What was it, Dasha? What didn't you mean to do?"

"The rain!" She stood up, her arms straight, her fingers straight. "I was talking about the rain." Her voice went low, and she turned her back on him, resting her forehead against a shuddering wall. "Never mind."

Razo was done with tiptoeing around slippery places. He grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Tell me."

She blinked fast, as though she were battered by sharp rainfall; then the release of her shoulders spoke of defeat. She held up her hand, and her

forefinger and thumb met, pinching the air. She put her finger out and showed a drop of water hanging from its tip. It got fatter and heavier, sagging until it dropped.

Razo gaped. “What’re you . . . ?”

She did it again and again, plucking drops of water from the air like berries from a summer bush. Her expression was calm, rapt, pleased.

“My grandfather taught me this. He called it river fingers. After I got the hang of it, he taught me this, too.” She grabbed at the air, and water hung from all five of her fingers like long, luminous nails. She shook them off. “And this.” She cupped her hand around nothing. Her palm filled with water, and she sipped it dry.

“It’s easy on days like today, so much water in the air, not just the rain, but the invisible damp. The world is full of water we can’t see. But I can . . . *feel* it.” Dasha stared at her open hand as drops of water gathered on her fingertips and rolled into the cup of her palm.

“You know the language of water,” Razo whispered. “You can draw it to you, like some folk can with wind or fire. You got the river to carry me, didn’t you? Ho there, now, I just realized something—that day in the assembly! You made the stair wet so the assassin would slip.”

She nodded. “I try not to use it much, but I wanted to help. That was all I knew how to do from that distance.” She shrugged, the gesture a self-criticism.

“I’ll bet you could do more than that,” said Razo, remembering how Isi had once pushed back five goose thieves with the wind, how Enna . . . Enna had done a lot of things.

Dasha tilted her head, crinkling her nose without smiling. “On days like today, I can feel how heavy the clouds are. My skin aches, and I know if I just feel it, just close my eyes and hear the clouds release, the rain break apart, the world sigh in relief, it will happen. But I don’t.” She touched her breastbone. “There’s a funny tickling inside me when I’m near the ocean, near a river, itching me to leap in and try something more. What I did with you today in the river, I had never done before.”

“Well, I thank you, then. Your, uh, river fingers saved my life. My friend Isi would call it the gift of water-speaking.”

“It does not seem like a gift. It killed my grandfather.”

“What? Killed your . . . How?”

Dasha searched Razo's eyes, and he straightened, tried to look as trustworthy as possible. The walls of the shack groaned again, a creak of wood as hard and distinct as a word. Dasha led Razo to the center of the room, sat beside him, and told her story.

"When I was six, after the death of my mother, I lived in the country under the care of my grandfather. That was the year he first told me about river fingers. He told me one had to be born to the talent in order to learn, and he sensed that, unlike my father, I had ability. His own mother had taught him; then before she died she forbade him to use it. He had obeyed her until he had a companion in the art."

Dasha harvested another water drop from the air, and she watched it sadly, as if it were a dead thing. "Grandfather could touch the dry creek shore and call the water to flood the banks or on a cloudy day ask the rain to fall. How it used to make me laugh!"

Razo became conscious again of the torrent on the roof, like fingernails scratching metal.

"When I was ten, my father brought me to Ingridan, where I was always afraid someone would guess what I could do. Even then, I sensed the wisdom in Grandfather's insistence on secrecy. Three years later, I returned to the country to find Grandfather looking haggard. At first I thought he was simply sad because he missed me." Dasha's laugh was bitter. Her fingers plucked at her skirt.

"One morning I sat at my window and saw Grandfather sneak away toward the creek. I thought he was off for a bit of fun!" Her voice cracked.

"So I followed . . ." She cleared her throat. "I followed him. Quietly, in bare feet. I stayed behind a bush, excited to catch him at some new river fingers trick. I remember he was sweating, or at least his face and arms were drenched, and he was muttering, 'Coming, I'm coming. . . .'He did not hesitate, just walked right into the creek and let himself fall. Not like he was going swimming, more like he was going to bed. The current pulled him down.

"I chased after him, Razo, I did, and when I couldn't find him, I ran into the water to listen—it sparked images in my mind of an otter upstream, of fish and crawfish and grubs, and trees that bowed themselves into the creek. No whisper of Grandfather. At the time I didn't understand. Now, I believe the river could no longer detect a difference between him and water."

Razo put his arm around her shoulder. She leaned in to him, her head resting against his neck. It made him sigh in relief—he did not like listening to someone else's pain without doing something to make it better. "Did you ever find him?"

"Downstream," she said blankly. "His body had washed ashore, drowned. The water had lied. He had sought to join it completely, but dead, he was still just a man."

Razo listened to the rain trying to find a way in. "Could that happen to you?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what happened to Grandfather. Maybe he used his talent too much, so I avoid it. But I want to use it, all the time, and it feels so natural when I do. A relief. But I'm afraid, too." She sat up so she could see Razo's face. "I know it's Enna, Razo."

Cold rushed from his belly up into his face. It was hard to play casual there in that scrap of a shelter with the storm tearing at the roof, Dasha's story still slumping around their shoulders, sad and strange, a tired ghost.

"What's Enna?" he asked.

"Enna is the fire-witch. I'd hoped your fire-witch might come with the Bayern, and so I volunteered to be the liaison. When I get close enough to touch, the water in the air can tell me who has a peculiar heat swirling about. I wanted . . . Please, Razo, don't think ill of me, I can see that little frown between your brows and your thoughts full of doubt now. . . . I wanted to meet the fire-witch, I thought she might give me a chance. Am I a fool?"

That was not a question Razo was eager to answer. Dasha sighed.

"My grandfather collected books with any mention of river fingers. I've been studying them and found out about the fire worshippers in Yasid, people who could spark fire from air. One author believed they could also call rain down."

The parchment in her room, he thought.

"They lived without struggling against the call of water, in harmony with water and fire. I thought if Enna could teach me . . ."

"You want Enna to teach you fire?" He did not try to deny it anymore.

"These past months, I have been hoping to make her friendship. I try to be where she will be, but I also fear that she will sense in me the river

fingers as I sensed the fire in her. It's funny, I feel at ease addressing the assembly, but around Enna I am all shaking knees and dry mouth. It's easier when you're around. You make people relax, you know that?"

"Really?"

First Talone tells him that he has the keen eye of a spy, then he is the best slinger Finn ever saw, and now he makes people relax. Why did everyone take so long to tell him these things? The best any of his brothers ever said was that he did not stink as sour as their third oldest brother, Thein, who after a day chopping wood reeked like a twice dead skunk.

"I was so happy when she came on that beach ride with us, but I guess . . ." Dasha shrugged. "For many, the war is hard to forget."

"So what *were* you doing by the river today?"

"Following Tumas. One night when I was trying to get up the courage to go to Enna's room and talk to her, I saw him climbing a tree, peering into her window. I fetched a palace guard, but when we returned he was gone. His intent might have been pure lechery, but I was afraid he might know what I know. I daydreamed that if I could figure out what Tumas knew and was able to tell Enna, then she might be grateful, she would think me . . ." Dasha shrugged, shy. "I was in the heart today and saw him heading down a side street alone. I'd lost him and was walking back up the Rosewater when I came upon you. Did Tumas kill that person?"

"I don't know." He had never told Finn and Enna his mandate from Talone, but inside that small, dry space, surrounded by an invasion of rain, telling Dasha felt like the safest thing in the world. "It's the sixth one found like that, burned, abandoned, though usually they're left near the Bayern, to cast suspicion, I think. To incite the people and push the assembly to vote for war." He sighed. "I'll talk to Enna. I'll ask her to teach you."

"Thank you, tree rat."

Razo leaned his cheek into the top of her head, smiling at how nice it felt, trying to ignore how his stomach pinched together at the thought of his intended conversation with a certain fire-witch.

In the sundown after rain, the eastern horizon was pale yellow and the clouds rich blue, as though the sky had pulled inside out. Razo walked home, his arm still around Dasha's shoulders, and thought he rather knew how the sky felt.

20

One Week

Are you insane?”

Enna paced. The night air that blew through her slatted shutters was cool with the memory of the rainstorm. It did not calm her much. “She’s Tiran! They’re trying to kill us, already succeeded with Veran.”

“Enna, please,” said Razo. “Dasha figured out you’re a fire-speaker on her own, and the fact she hasn’t told anyone’s a good sign, right? She could get overwhelmed by the water speech, just like you were with fire. She could die. If she had the balance of both water and fire like you do with wind and—”

“Razo, I spent weeks prisoner to a Tiran who had a prettier tongue than your Dasha, and he flattered me and took care of me and made me believe I was his friend, his . . .” She glanced at Finn, then hurried on. “What he wanted in return was to learn fire speech, said it would make the Tiran general trust me, that it was for my good, for Bayern’s good. I almost did it! He didn’t really care about me or Bayern, none of them do. If you’re set on being the fool, Razo, I’ll not stand by and watch. I can’t”—her voice broke—“live that nightmare again.”

Finn frowned. “Maybe she could go to Yasid. . . .”

“What, do you want a Tiran to learn fire and come burning down our doors? Besides, the people I met there, they were very particular about who they would teach. Go ahead and send her to the desert and tell her good riddance.”

Finn took Enna’s hand. “Enna, you don’t have to teach her anything, but if you just talk—”

Enna ripped loose from Finn’s grip and stormed out the door, Finn at her heels.

“That went well,” Razo muttered to himself.

He met Dasha in the courtyard under the grasping sweet scent of lime trees in their autumn bloom. She stood when he approached, clasping her hands.

"And?"

Razo rubbed his hair. "Dasha, Enna is, she . . ."

"She is not going to help me," she said, her tone empty.

"Enna's not a bad sort. It's just that she's been hurt before, betrayed in a foul way by a Tiran fellow—"

"I understand. How can she trust me? Of course she can't. Well, it was just a hope. Maybe there will be some other way."

Her tone was light and sincere, her smile full of enthusiasm. Razo knew Enna had been overcome by fire nearly to the point of death before she and Isi could get to Yasid and find balance. He did not have much hope for some other way.

"Listen, Enna may change her mind . . . well, maybe she'll . . . that is, if only . . ."

Dasha laughed lightly. "Razo, you're a mess! Don't worry about me."

But he could not help it. Besides, if Dasha was innocent, a murderer was still out there, unknown. He felt an unpleasant, squirmy prickle, not unlike when his brothers dropped a fern spider down his shirt.

"Enna's loyal, deep as her bones' bones," said Razo. "If she knew you, she'd trust you. Help me figure out who's behind the burning and stop them, and Enna'll change her mind. She'll believe then that you're a friend to Bayern."

Dasha's eyes flashed in the moonlight. "Will it be dangerous?"

"Oh, I guess, now that you mention it, that it might—"

"Sounds like fun."

When Razo reported to Talone in his chamber the next morning, he ended his story after rolling the body into the river, omitting the part where he confided his role as spy and the discovery of six bodies to the most likely suspect, who also happened to have water-speaking and knew about Enna and quite possibly was Bayern's biggest threat. Razo swallowed nervously, then belched air. He knew he was a terrible liar, but Talone seemed too preoccupied to notice.

"The assembly has decided to vote on the war matter in one week." Talone stood, resting his arms on the windowsill. "Despite a shift in public

opinion with those who remained in Ingridan over the summer, the majority of citizens are still angry about the end of the war, still chanting for a second chance. There have been six burned bodies so far. Unless there's a dramatic change, unless the public turns against Manifest Tira and the body burner is found and stopped, Lord Belvan believes the assembly will vote for war."

Razo opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Talone nodded, agreeing with what Razo did not say.

"And if in the meantime another body is discovered," said Talone, rubbing his eyes, "Belvan suggested we depart Tira in the night."

"One week?" The cost of telling Dasha the truth just rose, higher than Razo could pay. He stood beside Talone, resting his elbows on the sill, and stared at the strips of outside activity he could see between the shutter slats.

His fingertips and toes were tingling. Usually this would be the moment where he would tell Talone everything and sit back while the captain decided what to do. Was it only yesterday that Razo had won a wrestling match against that Manifest Tira dagger boy? He felt the possibilities of other victories ticking the pulse in his neck, making his muscles long to run.

"One week." Razo looked Talone dead in the eye. He felt excited and hopeful, and at the same time terrified and unsure, but for once he knew his expression betrayed nothing but confidence. "I'll do it, Captain. Before they vote, I'll figure it all out."

It was a ridiculous promise, and he felt like a little boy sticking a ring of pinecones on his head and declaring himself king. But he'd said it, and now his blood sped with the hope of, *What if I really can do it? What if I do?*

He left without another word and went to find Dasha. An ache like a lead ball in his gut told him that Dasha could be playing him like a harp, nudging him to sing out just the tune she wanted, making him think he was creating his own music. But he believed she was innocent. He had made his choice.

Razo took Dasha to the most private place he knew in Thousand Years. While trailing Tumas last spring, he had discovered an empty barracks. The inside smelled fusty and sour, of spilled wine and bedclothes abandoned in a rush, a patina of dust drowsing over everything. The building stood white and cold and barren, a memorial to some of the hundreds of Tiran soldiers who would never return from the battlefields of Bayern. *Had they been burned?* Razo scratched his calf with a toe. A footstep in the dirt of the

training circle meant someone had been here recently, but on looking again, Razo thought it might have been made by his own sandal.

On the abandoned training ground, he began to teach Dasha the sling, having noticed that people talk more easily when their hands are occupied. While she tried out a few stones, he stayed behind her, his arm across her back, his hand around her wrist. His chin touched her hair. The first time the stone left the sling in a more or less straight line, Dasha screeched with joy.

"You're not doing something tricky?" asked Razo. "Making it fly straight by using water . . . somehow?"

"No." Dasha's fingernail traced the middle of the braided sling as she thought. "I wonder if I . . . if the water . . . No, I don't see how. I might be able to do the reverse—weigh down a stone with water, make it go off course."

"That was a pretty good shot, then. Try it on your own." Razo kept his hand on her waist a moment before stepping back. "I'm uneasy about the body we found by the river. Usually they're dumped near the Bayern barracks or stable, and once by our camp. Seems like Tumas—if it was Tumas—got interrupted. That means he'd some other plan."

"You don't think it was him?" Dasha winced as her stone slumped out of her sling.

"Seems likely, but neither of us actually saw him with the body. Do you know him? Any reason why he'd want to pin burning deaths on Bayern besides that he's just a nasty-fingered, putrid-breathed, nose-breaking mud eater?"

"None that I know of, though that list of attributes alone might be enough to convict him."

"The location of the bodies, especially the first one, makes me think it might be someone in Captain Ledel's company."

"What about the captain himself? Fly straight, you stupid stone! He lost a brother in the Battle of Ostekin Fields."

Razo sat up. Dasha's stone hit a tree stump. "Good shot! A brother? Was he killed by soldiers or burned?"

"I'm not certain, but that was not all. Captain Ledel was the leader of the southern forces in Bayern and stood to advance considerably when Tira occupied. I had heard some rumors that he would be second in command over all occupation forces—that was, of course, before the war was lost. The leader of Tiran forces in Bayern, Captain Tiedan, was executed for his

failure. I suppose Captain Ledel is lucky he was just demoted to a twenty captain."

"I wonder if he'd consider himself lucky." Razo scratched marks into the dirt. *If it smells like bacon, it'll taste like bacon,* his ma used to say. "But Ledel swears by order, following the proper rules of war and all that. Wouldn't sneaking and murdering during peacetime be against his rules?"

"I would think so," said Dasha.

"He just doesn't strike me as the kind who could murder people, burn them like that. And he's got a tight leash on his men. Even Tumas seems afraid to jump without his approval. I can't imagine his soldiers would do something as involved as burn other Tiran and blame it on the Bayern without their captain's permission. It all doesn't click together in my head."

"What about Victar, Assemblyman Rogis's son?" said Dasha. *Thwack!* went her stone against wood.

"Uh, are you aiming for that particular tree?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised. "I am now."

"In that case, excellent shot. Why'd you ask about Vic-tar? He seems like a good sort, and he's been friendly kind with me."

"I don't know him myself, but my father mentioned once that Rogis was one of the loudest voices in support of invasion."

"Aw, not Victar. I like him," said Razo, jumping up to put more stones in Dasha's outstretched hand. "But he does have a touch of the radical in him, does Victar, goes his own way, never looks at Ledel for approval." Razo scratched his chin a bit harder than needed. "Wait, um, he didn't go to his father's country estate this summer, did he? I think I heard that he and his father are estranged. Maybe they disagreed about the war."

Thwack! "That actually was the place I was aiming for! Heard it from whom?"

"One of the girls in the pastry kitchen."

Plop, her stone fell to the ground. "Heard it how? Did you just ask them?"

"We talk, me and the pastry girls. We're friendly." Not that he'd been there recently, what with pastries that killed large dogs.

"Friendly?"

"As in friends. I'm friends with the girls in the kitchens, friendly kind of friends."

“Oh, I see.” Dasha flicked the sling over his shoulder. “Thanks for the practice. I’ll ask around, see what else I can find out about Captain Ledel and his men.”

“Just take care that you don’t give yourself away.”

“Oh, I can be *subtle.*” She gave him a significant look and left without waiting for him to pick up the fallen shot. He clinked the stones into his pouch and wondered how the mood had plunged from summer to winter inside a moment. Could she have been upset just because he frequented the pastry kitchen? It did not make any sense.

One week, he thought.

Come night, he planned to climb a tree beside Ledel’s barracks and spy a bit, but there were still hours of anxious daylight. He was standing in the skinny shade of a tree beside the barracks, deliberating what to do next, when he saw a young man with short hair weaving through the relentless traffic of the palace grounds. He caught sight of a copper-colored glint on his hand before the young man disappeared into the palace.

Razo did not need a closer look to guess it was a copper ring, marked with the head of a ram.

21

An Ambassador's Assassin

Razo ran, his breath fuming in his lungs. The young man had been moving toward the south wing of the palace, where both Megina and Enna lived. When he shimmied through the crowds and into the palace, the *clack* of sandals on stone stairs was just fading out of hearing. Up he hiked to the third floor, relieved to find two Bayern sentries still posted outside the ambassador's room.

"Has anyone come looking for Lady Megina?" he asked Conrad.

"Not in an hour. Why?"

"Is she in there?" Razo gestured to the door, looking over his shoulder to watch for anyone coming from behind.

"Yes, she's there."

"And Enna's in her room?"

"No, she's off with Finn and Lord Belvan in the city. Razo, what's going on? You look like—"

"Make sure Megina's all right, then don't let anyone in. I'll be back."

Razo fled to the stairs, slid down the rails, and raced to see if he could spot the potential assassin outside. Talone was approaching the palace, and when he saw Razo's face, he ran to meet him.

"Manifest Tira in the palace . . ." Razo sputtered words, his breath disheveled with anxiety. "Maybe looking for Megina. I lost him—"

Then they both saw—a man scaling the outside of the palace, climbing from a second-story window to the third story, straight toward one of Megina's windows. Her shutters were open, inviting in the cool air as well as any assassins who cared to call.

"I'll go in," said Talone, veering toward the door to the palace. "You—"

Talone did not finish his sentence, but Razo knew what he was going to say. He was already pulling free his distance sling, drawing a stone from his

bag. The target was too far away, so he kept running as he put the stone in the leather pouch and swung it round. The moment he was close enough, he let it free, the shot ripping the air as it circled. The man dropped into the window, the stone striking the space where his head had just been.

Razo cursed and kept running so hard, the back of his throat ached and tasted of blood. When he reached the place where the young man had climbed, Raz leaped onto a windowsill and shinned up ledges. Palace guards were running at him, shouting.

"Assassin!" Razo pointed up. "I'm trying . . . stop the assassin . . . the ambassador!"

He swung an arm over Megina's windowsill and heard metal whack metal. Pulling himself onto his elbows, he saw Talone raise his sword in defense against the Tiran's swing. Megina stood behind Conrad and the other Bayern sentry, one sleeve of her dress ripped, cloth hanging open like a wound.

Razo scrambled into the room, rolling out of the way when the fight got too close, and grabbed a javelin lying on the floor. He crouched and waited for a clean shot at the Tiran man, hoping to nab one of his legs, but the opponents tangled and pulled away, circled and sliced, swung fists when swords locked, never offering Razo an opening.

Come on, come on. Razo was not fond of bare swords swinging in small spaces. They often managed to slice a bit of skin or lob off limbs and heads. Suddenly the Tiran lurched, and his leg curved behind Talone's heels, tripping him back. Talone hit the floor.

"No!" cried Razo, leaping forward.

But the Tiran sword stopped short. Talone's own sword thrust up through the Tiran's white tunic. It was quickly turning red.

Talone yelled with effort, pushing the sword and man away. The Tiran fell dead to the side.

The room was filling with Tiran soldiers—Lord Belvan's men, Razo was relieved to see. Had it been Ledel's, he might have drawn his own sword. Soldiers climbed through the windows and burst through the doors, exclaiming and demanding answers until Megina's clear voice cut through the noise. Within minutes, the Tiran soldiers carried the body away, bolted the windows, sent men to search the rest of the south wing, and set up guards on every floor.

Razo sat in a corner, playing with a cut on his hand, a result of clambering up the wall too quickly. He ripped a corner of cloth from one of the ambassador's tunics (*don't think she'll mind, as I helped save her life and all,* he thought), tied up the cut, and discovered himself alone but for Talone and Megina, who stood in the center of the room, facing each other, apparently having forgotten that Razo existed.

"You're not hurt." Talone looked over her body as if making certain, his hand lifting a flap of her torn sleeve, letting it fall.

"Thank you, Captain." Her hand kept fluttering to her heart and back to her side, as if she did not know where to put it.

"That was quick thinking," said Talone. "You kicked him solid, gave me a chance to get between you."

Megina's eyes widened. "I did kick him, didn't I?"

Her lips tensed, his tensed, and then, unexpectedly, they both laughed. It spooked Razo to goose bumps.

"The king spoke for hours on your many talents, Lady Megina, but he neglected to mention the kicking."

Megina was laughing until she squeaked. "Don't tell him! This entire enterprise has been failure and terror and bad news, and I don't want to give him any more reason to laugh at me. Though I don't mind if you do, Captain."

The laughing stopped, her eyes still teary. "I suppose I'll have to keep a guard with me now, on both sides of the door."

"I will see to it," he said, though his voice was husky, seemingly saying different words altogether. He looked at her face, her hands.

"If you're to assign me a constant guard," she said, wincing as though confessing a bad deed, "I would that it was you."

Razo held his breath, afraid that any moment they would remember his presence. He crept to the exit and had almost escaped unnoticed when his javelin tip caught the doorjamb and clattered to the floor. He swiped it up and ran off.

His ribs itched inside him where he could not scratch. Seeing them made him see himself. He had been the one in the room who stood alone, whom no one looked at, who dropped his javelin and ran away. He knew he should be laughing at it, but just then he could not. No one had ever *looked* at him in the way Megina had looked at Talone, as if she never wished to look away.

Bettin had made him feel that the world was a laugh, that he was a bucketful of fun, that his heart zigging in his chest was the only way to feel. But in the end it had been a lie.

He thought of Dasha.

Nothing sounded worse to Razo just then than being alone, so he climbed to the fourth floor. The prince was challenging Nom to a game of Tempests, carved marble pieces played on a round board. At a glance, Razo could see Nom was beating him soundly.

"Razo's-Own! What a pleasure. We see you all too infrequently since the summer's end. I hope your captain is not working you too hard. But see how your face is red, and you are sweating. Celi! Please bring cold drinks and grapes, and I recall Razo's-Own enjoyed a good strip of bacon, well crisped, or is that too heavy for afternoon? Well, bring it anyway, and, ooh, see if there are fresh peaches, not the pockmarked ones, of course, nor those hard little yellow ones. I would rather go without, wouldn't you?"

Razo leaned back against a heap of pillows, too tired to care about sweating on the fine fabric. He was aware that the prince had asked a question but could not recall what it had been, so he offered a noncommittal, "Mm."

"Precisely so," said the prince.

Razo waited to gulp down some water before sharing the news of the ambassador, the assassination attempt, and his captain's quick sword. The sight of Talone and Megina looking at each other still made his heart rattle strangely in his chest, and he could not cork up that feeling enough to hold back a gusty exhale.

The prince frowned in his way, which was simply the absence of amusement around his mouth. "You are worried, my friend, about your presence in my country, about the hope of your mission of peace."

"The assembly votes in less than a week, and it's not looking good for us. I'd hoped all those people using Bayern dyes meant that Tiran opinion was improving. I guess we just won over the summer folk, and the rich and powerful haven't changed their minds." Razo played with the fringe on a pillow, accidentally pulling several strands loose. He stuffed them under another pillow before anyone could notice.

The prince was quiet, eating grapes as a merchant inspects coins. Razo's eyes had just closed when the prince shouted, "I have it! A way to support your cause. I'd already considered marrying a Bayern, but the only

noblewoman in your party is the ambassador. It is a shame your king does not have a sister, but just as well—marrying a Bayern woman at this time of crisis might cause more harm than good, giving impetus for others to rise up and oppose. No, the situation needs a more subtle solution. Just now I hit upon it—the ambassador's daughter!"

Razo did not want to argue, the prince seemed so elated with the idea, but he had to say, "Radiance, Lady Megina doesn't have any children."

"No, no, you mistake me. I mean the *Tiran* ambassador, Lord Kilcad's daughter, the fiery-haired girl. Is that not perfect?"

Razo wanted very much to sit down and then realized that he already was.

"She is a little thing," said the prince, peeling a grape. "Strange hair color in that family, but very respectable. Lord Kilcad is the Tiran most actively campaigning for peace, and she is the liaison to the Bayern. If I chose her, no one could mistake where the prince sides on this issue. I shall write to her father for permission at once, and I'll do it just for you, my friend."

Razo forced himself to lean back, act casual. He bumped a pillow fringed with tiny bells, and it tinkled sadly.

"Razo's-Own, you do not seem pleased."

"I . . . uh . . ." A turning stomach struck him as an extreme reaction to such news. So what if the prince was going to marry Dasha? They were all nobles, and it was just the sort of thing fancy folk were wont to do. A poor Forest boy and a noble Tiran girl would be a ridiculous match, and he would not cross three days of Forest in two days to tell her what he thought, never again. No, he and Dasha were a passing thought, a moth fluttering by his nose on its way to the firelight.

"I think that'd be a noble thing, Radiance," Razo said.

"Precisely!"

22

The Grape Harvest Festival

The early-autumn air was in constant motion, gusts of cold, bursts of warmth. The entire world felt ready to happen. With less than a week remaining, Megina thought they had little to lose and declared it was time for the Bayern to celebrate a Tiran festival.

"It's Tira's most important feast day. Look sharp, act humble, don't be quick to draw your weapons. Perhaps the sight of Bayern celebrating among them will hearten the citizens."

At dusk, Razo wandered to the Bayern stable, watching tree shadows, peering through barracks and palace windows, thrumming to the beat of *five days left, five days left.* Enna and Finn were waiting at the stable, and she seized upon Razo at once for his version of what had happened the day before. He gave it gladly, emphasizing his clever deductions—how the fellow's haircut had reminded him of other Manifest Tira assassins and his astounding observance of the telltale copper ring.

"Wish I'd been in Megina's room. I mean, I wouldn't've burned him," Enna said, though no one accused, "but I could've burned the sword out of his hand, and then he'd still be alive for questioning."

Razo thought this was a good moment to describe the curious scene that had occurred after the swordplay.

"No," said Enna, pleased.

"Yes," said Razo, also pleased.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it. Talone and Megina were *looking* at each other in *that way.*"

Enna leaned back against the stable wall, laughing, and sighed at the sky. "Who'd ever've guessed? That's lovely, that is."

Finn smiled but took himself a bit apart, his body half-turned away from Enna. Something felt wrong to Razo, distance and tension buzzing between

those two. He did not know what it meant.

Megina and Talone arrived, striding quickly from the palace. Razo, Enna, and Finn spied on them from behind the stable, waiting for their captain to do something ridiculous like throw her over his shoulder. But he was all business, counting men and assigning duties. Megina did not meet his eyes.

"Are you sure, Razo?" Enna whispered.

"Look, he's blushing," Finn said in jest.

"He'll lose her for sure, acting distant and untouchable like that," said Enna. "He's got to speak up now, make sure she knows how he feels."

Finn snorted. Enna turned slowly, giving Finn a glare she usually reserved for everyone else. He shook his head, meaning, *Never mind.*

"What, you think I'm being hypocritical?" she asked.

"I've told you my mind, asked you dozens of times—"

"So stop asking or I'm never going to say yes."

"Why not?" Finn's voice was strong as a rope, pulling for an answer.

"You can't just assume, Finn. Look at you, the strong man, the warrior, all muscles and sword, always knowing exactly what I'm going to want, standing ready whenever I need water or an arm or a kiss."

"What's wrong with that?" said Razo, his stare blank.

"Stay out of this, Razo."

"Enna, why're you doing this?" asked Finn.

"What, you don't like the way I am anymore? Is that it? You want me to be as perfect as you all the time?" Enna slapped his chest. "Why *do* you have to be so perfect, huh? I'm waiting for you to lose your cool, Finn, just once. So go on! Why don't you make a fool of yourself for me?"

Enna stared up, Finn stared down. Razo scratched his neck and started to back away. "I . . . uh, I'll just . . ."

"Don't bother," said Finn. He punched a tree trunk as he left.

Razo gave Enna a thump on the shoulder. "That was Finn you were berating, not some nasty Tiran body burner. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know." She swatted his hand away, her voice still angry. "Maybe I'm scared, or . . . I'm just . . . I don't know."

"You better know. You'd better know something before you start talking to Finn like—"

"Look," said Enna, "saying I'll love someone forever isn't as easy as . . . as pulling yarn from a ball. It's all knotted and kinked inside me. And if I let someone tug on me again . . ." She winced to keep herself from crying.

“Ugh! Do you know what I’m saying? I let someone before, and I was wrong and he was bad, and then Finn came and he was perfect, and I thought I was easy with it, and I am easy with him. He makes me feel like Enna. He makes me feel . . .” Enna sat on the ground, Razo dropping down beside her.

“I don’t understand you, Enna. If you love him . . .”

“I do, but it’s not that easy. I hate how he just assumes everything’s fine. Why can’t he ever do something . . . something big, something dramatic, something frightening, woo me, show me that he loves me that much?”

“Finn’s just not that way. He’s the quiet kind.”

“Is he? Or does he just not care as much as he used to?” She halted. Her voice frowned. “And I can’t keep the disquiet away, the whispers that say he could betray me, too.”

Razo blew out his lips. “Aw, Enna-girl. Not Finn, never Finn.”

“You’re right.” She said it lightly, as though she did not have the energy to argue. “So, you over Bettin?”

The question was so unexpected, it made him choke on his own spit. “No, and I won’t ever be, so save your voice telling me it’s done. I know it’s done, but I decided to love her always, and that’s not something a boy can just undo because she’s gone and everyone says to get over it already.”

From the direction of the gardens, Razo could just make out Finn shuffling toward them, one long, yellow flower clutched in his hand.

“He’s bringing me a flower,” Enna whispered, her tone flat, edged with disappointment.

Finn seemed to hesitate, then tossed the flower to one side and turned back around.

“Finn, wait!” Enna jumped up and ran after him.

Great crows, Razo thought, *we’re every one of us a tangle too thick to pick.*

As the Bayern moved out, Razo glimpsed Enna and Finn talking as they walked. Finn’s head was lowered so she could hear his quiet voice. She took his arm, they moved closer, but neither smiled, and Razo widened his eyes with the realization that Enna and Finn might not always be Enna and Finn. Suddenly the stones beneath his sandals did not feel so solid.

The group took no horses or carriages—the celebration of the grape harvest began everywhere at midnight and paraded down the avenues, converging in the heart. With Enna on her left, Talone on her right, and

Bayern's Own encircling her, Megina held aloft an oil lamp and offered a hearty greeting to anyone she passed.

All along the streets, artists gave of their talents freely—theater groups strutted their rehearsed stories on the plazas, painters scratched at the pavement with charcoal, and poets wrapped their words around passersby. In Bayern, drums drove festival music like a heartbeat, but the Tiran lap harps and flutes lacked that pulse, sliding down the streets and into Razo's ears, ghostly.

The Bayern crossed paths with others they knew from the palace. Even Ledel was there, though Razo recalled Vic-tar saying that Ledel often disappeared on feast days. Razo checked that his sling was at hand.

Victar and his friends were holding their oil lamps aloft and singing a grape walker's song: "Let it gush through your toes till it pleases the nose. What I crush with my feet will be bitter and sweet." Dasha pranced from the head of the group back to Megina, then out to skip beside Victar and his friends, full of song, her hands sticky with grape juice. Razo realized he was aware of her even when she disappeared from view. It was a pleasant, subtle sensation, like being in a noisy tavern but through the clatter and roar still being able to recognize the intonations of a familiar song.

The festivities massed along the banks of Ingridan's three central rivers —the Autumn, the Heart's Finger, and the Tumult—and the romp of the crowds pulled the company to the shores of the latter. The tiled banks were full-moon white under the eerie light of the oil lamps. Hundreds of tiny candles floated in hollowed apples, darting through the water's ripples.

Razo stood well back from the edge, remembering his last encounter with a river, the blinding impact that had seemed to yank his body from his soul, and the peculiar noise of deep water—

"Hello, tree rat!"

Razo leaped back, terrified of plummeting into another river. His legs slammed into something solid, his balance surrendered, and he found himself sitting in a fountain with a soaking bum.

Dasha applauded. "You seem to do that a lot, falling backward."

"Just around you, apparently." He squeezed some water out of his leggings and sat on the fountain rim, Dasha beside him. She wore the front part of her hair knotted on top of her head and stuck with a silver pin. He was tempted to pull the pin and let her hair fall. "Did you make me stumble into the fountain?"

She laughed. “I might be able to coax some water over the side, but I can’t force a person to throw himself in. Besides, with you I wouldn’t need to.”

Her tone was so happy, he wondered why he had been avoiding her, then recalled that she was a royal bride-to-be. Not that it changed anything for him.

“I see the whole lot is out tonight,” she said. “I am surprised you came, actually. Aren’t you worried about Lady Megina?”

“She’s as safe as a bunny in a box.” Razo squeezed water from his tunic and nodded in Megina’s direction. Finn stood to her side, his gaze wary. Enna loafed on her other side, laughing at a three-woman theater troupe’s farcical reenactment of childbirth.

“Finn may be the best swordsman in the Own,” said Razo, “and that Enna-girl . . . well, if I were a tick, I wouldn’t bite her ankle.”

“Are you jealous of Finn?”

The question was quick and flat, and it made Razo blink.

“Because he’s a swordsman? No, he works hard—”

“Not that, because of Enna.”

Razo barked a laugh. “Enna? Hardly.”

“But you seem so fond of her. You give her a nickname, and nicknames are always a sign of affection.”

“What, Enna-girl? That’s just because of my sister. I’m the youngest of six boys, and when Rin was born, the family and neighbors were so elated not to have another boy, everyone took to calling her Rinna-girl. When I first met Enna in Bayern’s capital, she reminded me of my sister—a bothersome, nasty little thing you can’t help liking.”

“So why don’t you call me Dasha-girl?” she asked.

“Because you don’t remind me of my sister.”

For some reason, that made Dasha blush. She flicked water in his face, though she had not dipped her hand into the fountain. “You’re gaping at me again, tree rat.”

“Wait, wait,” he said, wiping his face. “You just said that nicknames are a sign of affection. Well, you call me tree rat. . . .”

Dasha stood, pulling off Razo’s green lummas and wrapping it around her own neck. “Aren’t you hungry? I think you should buy me some toasted cheese.”

Razo dashed over to Finn and Enna first to see if they wanted anything, as they could not leave Megina's side. Enna looked to where Dasha was hopping on her toes by a group of musicians.

"I don't trust her, Razo," she said.

"So you told me." That Enna did not like Dasha, that Dasha might not be what she seemed, made him feel black and crumbly inside. He'd already decided to trust her, and that was that. "Do you want toasted cheese? Or anything else?"

"No, thanks, I'm not—"

Razo felt heat. It surged past him like a livid wind, singeing the sleeve of his tunic. He gasped at its bite and stumbled back. The barrel beside him exploded into flame.

The music yelped and ceased as though stopped by a hand around the throat. Hundreds of Tiran turned to the fire and stared.

"Enna, that must've been a fire-speaker."

"I know," she whispered back.

Razo dropped on his belly as another scorching gust *swoosh*ed overhead. Had he been the target? Behind him was a wooden stand spilling fruit. For a frozen moment, he saw the round woman who kept watch at the stand, a little boy reaching for a bunch of blue grapes, and he shut his eyes, afraid to see them seared.

Then, wind. From beside him. He opened his eyes. The fruit stand did not burn.

More heat followed, more wind chased it away. Nothing was visible to the eye, but Razo knew what Enna could do. She was anticipating each barrage of heat; she was winnowing it from the air, scattering it before it reached its target and became fire. He watched her, the way her gaze sought the sky as though counting stars, her fists clenched and unclenched, her breath held each time she sensed new fire on the air.

Razo wondered what it must feel like, to know the voice of fire and wind, to sit inside them, feel them coming, heave them into motion, stamp them out again. It was a power that he knew he would never share. No voices of wind or fire or water reached for him. Watching Enna, he thought it must be a marvelous thing to be able to do so much, to feel so powerful.

The flows of heat stopped. Enna wiped her brow, blinked long, holding still as if listening with all her skin. Finn was beside her, holding her arm in case she was weak, but Razo thought she glowed with contentment.

“Good work, Enna-girl,” he whispered. No one was burned, and no one knew who she was. Slyly done.

“I think he’s out,” she whispered. “The fire-speaker. He’s probably new at this. You can burn for only so long before you can’t hold any more heat and need a rest. I think he’s done for the night.”

The fruit merchant dumped a bucket of water over the barrel fire, but no one else moved. Razo felt the eyes of the crowd on them, a new and unpleasant touch of heat. A horde of Bayern standing in front of a mysteriously charred barrel had to look bad.

“I am so sorry!” Dasha addressed the food vendor, gesturing grandly as though to draw attention. “I am so sorry. I tripped and my lamp dropped. The wine had saturated that barrel, and it just took to flame. Did you see that?” She looked at Razo, tilting her head, her expression innocent.

Razo jumped to his feet. “Oh yes, that was a thing. That wood must’ve been soaked clean through. You’re a clumsy bit, aren’t you, dropping your lamp like that?”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “I tripped.”

“Yes, a rather ham-fisted thing to do,” he said, staring right back, daring himself not to smile.

The merchant glanced between them. “Well, my barrel is ashes now, and I—”

Dasha handed the lady a coin. The crowd lost interest, conversation renewed, music breathed merriment back into the night.

“Well done,” he said.

“Did Enna . . . ?”

He nodded. “Stopped it cold. Now at least we know this isn’t some lunatic sticking people in his kitchen hearth. We’ve got a genuine fire-speaker on the loose.”

He examined the crowd. Most of Ledel’s men were interspersed with the Bayern, including Victar. Tumas stood on the fringes, glowering, his horde of hulking friends on hand. Ledel himself was no longer in sight. Searching for Ledel, Razo caught sight of a man watching a troupe of actors. He was thirty or so years old, his hand was drumming the cloth at his waist, and his hair was cropped short. On one finger, Razo thought there was a band of green skin, like the stain a copper ring would leave behind.

“Enna, see that fellow over . . .”He started to point when the man began to walk forward, all the while keeping his eyes on the actors. “Shh, pretend

not to see him."

The man shouldered his way through Ledel's men. He was steadily approaching Megina.

"It's one of them, I'm sure," Razo whispered. "If we stop him before he attacks, it'll look like we're just attacking random Tiran, but if we don't, he could hurt Megina."

Enna nodded. "I can do this. Finn, be ready, so I don't have to go all the way. Please."

The man edged in, his eyes averted, his expression casual, but Razo noted that his whole body was tense. Then, like a snake, he sprang.

"Manifest Tira!" The man pulled a very long dagger from his belt.

Razo felt a *whoosh* of heat at his side. The man yelped and dropped the dagger. Finn kicked him in the chest, sending him to the ground, his sword at the man's throat. The Bayern made a tight circle around Megina, Talone shouting instructions.

Razo was watching Enna. Despite the attempted assassin at her feet and the crowd simmering around them, she leaned back her head and smiled right up at the stars.

Megina sighed. "And I guess that's the bell for bed." She waved at the crowd and shouted, "We're all fine! Thank you. Enjoy your festival!"

Patrol guards removed the dagger-happy fellow from beneath Finn's boot, tied and took him off, and the crowd jeered and threw grapes and melon rinds. Razo wondered if they despised him for attempting to kill the ambassador or for failing.

Dasha returned to Thousand Years with the Bayern, yawning behind Razo's nicked lummas. "I could be banished from Ingridan for getting sleepy at a midnight festival."

"Really?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes as though imitating his own oft-used expression.

"Well, you never know, my lady, different cultures and such, and what with the baby eating . . ."

They did not talk again as they walked home, the surging crowds of the streets conversing for them. He did not feel tired. A fire-speaker among them. Burning barrels in a crowd. Willing to kill Tiran citizens in order to make the Bayern look guilty. And another assassin.

Were Manifest Tira and the body burner connected? He considered how Manifest Tira always went right for the ambassador, whereas the fire-

speaker had targeted items near the Bayern. Manifest Tira fanatics were bold, throwing their own lives in peril just to get a swipe at Megina; but the fire-speaker struck from the shadows. It seemed Talone's guess had been right—the two groups must be separate. So who was the fire-speaker?

Razo listened to the muttering roar of the crowd and heard no answers.

23

From the Spying Tree

Razo could not sleep. Festivity rattled and clanked in the city, vibrations of merriment running under his cot, up into his bones. He stuck his head under his pillow but could not stifle the jangle of music as it staggered on with punchy energy.

His cot began to feel like an enemy holding him captive but refusing him sleep. *Four days left,* he kept thinking. So he left the sputtering snores behind and climbed his spying perch in the tree outside Ledel's barracks. He leaned his spine against a branch, holding himself steady with his feet against the trunk, and stared at the shredded blackness the leaves made of the night sky. The bells tolled the time: two hours before dawn.

Razo was in the blissful inebriation of half-sleep when a grating whoop shocked him awake. Three of Ledel's men slurred and shouted their whispers, lurching into their barracks. Razo's skin was clammy with dew, and he thought he had best get down in a hurry. He did not want to risk waking in the tree after sunrise, Tumas at sword practice under the branches.

He was rubbing his arms and warming himself enough to move when a creak made his skin feel alert. Someone was emerging from the back of the barracks, pushing a small cart like the ones the gardeners used. The wheels groaned, speaking of too much weight, then stopped cold with a screech of metal. The cart apparently would not budge. The someone lifted the cargo out of the cart and threw it over his shoulder.

Razo struggled to see in the gray rind of moonlight. Hanging from under the canvas was a shadow the shape of a limp hand. He could not see color in that muted light, but the raised hairs on his arms told him it was most likely burned black.

This is it, this is it, he chanted to himself. He had caught the murderer in the midst of the dirty deed.

The someone steadied the weight on his shoulder and started toward the Bayern barracks. Razo sat up, straining for more detail to identify the man. He held another branch to catch his balance and leaned forward. And heard the branch whine.

The someone stopped. He threw the body back in the cart and came toward the tree.

"Something up there," he said in the singsong way a father talks to little children. It made Razo's stomach try to flee up his throat. There was a rasp to his voice Razo knew. There was the outline of those bulky shoulders against the thin moon peering. That hair that Razo remembered was a dirty yellow was loose and hanging over his shoulders, looking strangely feminine on the warrior.

Ledel moved closer to the tree, his steps making no sound.

"I can see you up there. You don't look like a branch, and you make too big a bird. If you are one of mine, I promise not to bite." He snapped his jaw twice.

There was no room up the tree to swing a sling, and Razo guessed the captain could burn him out of it at any moment. His only option was to run.

Razo scampered through the branches and dove onto the barracks roof. He bounded across the apex until his foot slammed down and his leg disappeared into splinters up to his knee. He pulled it out, leaped off the far side of the roof, and, ignoring a twisting pain in his ankle, ran like a squirrel from an errant sling stone.

He did not dare stop at the Bayern barracks and instead tried to lose Ledel by weaving between buildings, behind trees, never giving the pursuing murderer a chance to get a good look. He hoped.

His frantic heart pounded vigor into his body; his terror gave him an eerie thrill. He could not escape into the palace without the sentries stopping him for questions. The palace gate with its many guards was uncomfortably near now, so he zigzagged and crisscrossed and finally ducked into the stables. Bee Sting would whine if she saw him, but he knew Enna's horse, Merry, was peculiarly calm, considering her rider, and slept like a buried stone. He dove into her stall, covering himself with straw.

His breath would not slow and made him wish he were still running. *Stupid choice, Razo,* he thought. Hiding meant staying in one place where

big brothers or burning men could eventually come.

And then, a heavy breath and footsteps. A pause. The steps resumed and paused again, as though examining every stall. And kept coming nearer. Razo tried to hold his breath, but his lungs heaved as his heart raged. His panting rustled the straw, sounding like the crackling of a fire. He stuffed his mouth into his elbow and tried to time his breathing with the horse's gusty inhales.

The footfalls stopped for a longer moment, and a horse grumbled for a treat. That would be his own Bee Sting. He heard a pat as if Ledel stroked her neck, and then the steps passed by. After several moments of silence, Razo allowed himself to scratch his nose.

Slowly, he started to ease upright. A crunching sound set his heart pounding even harder, and he hesitated. Silence. He had to get out and hide that body before others found it. Again, he began to rise from the straw. A twitter, a growl, a hush. Silence. Razo pressed a fingernail into the skin of his forehead to keep himself sane. He had to go, now. *Go!* He heard a squeak and eased himself back under the straw.

I'm in a cursed stable, he thought. *It's never going to be totally quiet. Just go.*

Silent as a cat (or so he hoped), Razo ascended from the straw, crept from the stall, and slammed right into someone. And squealed. A shrill cry of surprise answered his squeal. It was not Ledel.

"What're you doing?" asked Razo. "You likely stopped my heart, sneaking around like that."

"I work the stables," said the Tiran boy, his eyes still wide. "I should call a sentry, you know. What were *you* doing in that stall?"

"I was . . . I . . ."He sneezed, and a flake of straw flew out of his nose. "Uh, the festival. Didn't quite make it back to my cot, I guess."

The boy squinted. "You're Bayern. You the one who goes around with the prince? I heard someone tried to kill you right in front of him."

"Nothing happens in Ingridan but everyone knows," said Razo. He stared out the door, wondering if the body would still be there. "Sorry about the startle. I'll go now, if that's all right."

"Go ahead. I'm not going to rat on the prince's friend. Um, did you know you have hay in your hair?"

"Of course I do. It's fashion."

Razo plucked the straw from his hair when he was well out of sight, removing an impressive handful.

Sneaking back to the barracks took a painfully long time, hiding from workers and sentries and from the sun as it shuffled over the horizon. There was no need for stealth by the time he reached the Bayern barracks. The soldiers were up and outside, milling around, tension humming in the air. A few of Ledel's men stood off, whispering to each other, as if trying to figure out what was going on. Razo found Talone under his spying tree.

"A body," Talone whispered. "A sentry found it beside a gardener's cart, covered it up, and sent for Lord Belvan. Ledel showed up soon after, helped Belvan's men get it out of sight. You look surprised."

"Just about Ledel helping to hide it."

"You think he's involved?"

"He's our man, Captain. I've nothing to prove it but the eyewitness of a Bayern, and I doubt any court in Tira will accept that evidence."

"Hm. I trust Belvan to keep this quiet, but Ledel's bound to let rumors of this body trickle out. Lady Megina should take Belvan's advice and we should leave before—"

"We've still got four days, Captain. Release me from other duties. Let me keep trying."

"The risk is too great," said Talone. "If we're here when they vote for war—"

"And if we leave now, there'll be no chance at all. We've got to keep trying. I can do it, Captain, please . . ."

Talone nodded. "Good luck, soldier."

Razo watched Talone leave, and only two things stopped him from racing after him and taking it all back—Talone had responded as though he trusted Razo, and Razo was beginning to have a plan.

He took to his heels again, first collecting Dasha from her chamber, where she was already dressed and up, and then off for Enna, who left Megina with Finn and other guards. Razo explained what he needed from them as they jogged across the grounds, Enna always slightly in the lead.

"Proof that Ledel's the fire-speaker. And in a hurry, before he burns someone else." Razo did not mention what he'd seen from his tree perch, or he would also have to tell the part where he ran and hid. "He's rotten with motive, and Victar mentioned he disappears sometimes for whole days. You've both been around him before, and you didn't notice anything?"

“I can never be sure,” said Enna. “It’s the wind that tells me that sort of stuff, and I’m not as good as . . .” She glanced sideways at Dasha. “I’m not so good at wind. I’d have to consciously beckon the wind that’s touched a person and listen to hear if it talks of heat and strange fire on the skin . . . but even then it’s not always clear.”

“That is fascinating,” said Dasha, putting on a respectful smile. “The water is touching me constantly, but I have to be really close to someone, touch them even, to tell if there isn’t as much water hanging in the air around a person, as though more heat than normal is burning the water away. I never noticed anything unusual about Ledel, but I guess I was only looking for a Bayern fire-witch.” She flinched after speaking the phrase and looked aside at Enna.

“So, Dasha, do you ever feel *compelled* to use water?” Enna asked.

Dasha opened her mouth, but for a moment she did not speak. “Sometimes I feel . . . pressure all around me. When I do something small, like fill my hand with water, the pressure lifts for a time. A day, a few hours. But that’s all I do, just small things.”

Dasha looked at Enna, eyes wide, hoping for approval. “Hmm,” was all Enna said.

When they drew near, Enna stopped. “You don’t think you’re coming with us, do you, Forest-born?” she asked with a laugh.

Razo glanced at Dasha, wondering if she knew what it meant to be Forest-born. “Why can’t I?”

“Because, sheep boy, your face is—”

“Is a signpost for all to read, I know. I’ll wait here.”

Enna grabbed Dasha’s wrist and muttered to her as they hurried away.

Razo sat in the petite shade of a flowering bush, flaking the bark off a twig until it was smooth as water wood. He watched Dasha and Enna amble around the barracks, look at Dasha’s sling, pretend to practice on Ledel’s training circle. Several soldiers came and went. Tumas passed by with painful slowness, and Razo kept his hand on his own sling until the man left Enna and Dasha alone. Then Ledel emerged. Razo slapped his neck, a sudden crawling sensation making him think he was besieged by spiders.

Dasha, her gait a happy skip, went to Ledel, apparently asking him some innocent question. Enna sidled up. They waited a bit after Ledel left to return to Razo.

“And, and?” he asked as the girls approached. “Ledel’s the fire-speaker?”

Both shook their heads.

Razo felt his mouth gape. “Are you . . . are you sure?”

“Ask her,” said Enna.

Dasha smiled meekly. “We . . . it was Enna’s idea . . . we combined talents. Enna moved the wind around Ledel and straight to me so I didn’t have to touch him. His heat seemed normal to both of us. We tested everyone who passed by, and that other soldier—”

“Ah-ha! I knew it was Tumas, that nose-breaking, mossy-breathed, rotting hunk of—”

“No, not him,” said Enna, “but his friend, the young one.”

“Yes, he had something,” Dasha agreed.

“Yes, something.” Enna nodded, thoughtful. “Not like . . .”

“Not like you, Enna,” said Dasha.

“No,” Enna agreed. “Maybe he’s just new to it, but I wouldn’t even’ve sensed a scrap of fire-speaking in him if it hadn’t been for Dasha. Razo, I don’t think he could be the burner from the grape harvest festival.”

“Come on, you two, if he’s got the fire-speaking, then that’s it. Tumas’s friend is our man, and Ledel’s helping him.”

“Maybe . . . ,” said Dasha. Enna nodded as if anticipating what she was going to say next. “Maybe there’s more than one.”

“Hello!” Victar stalked up, trailing his group of friends. “What a stale air in the city. We need a brisk sea wind, this autumn heat is beginning to ferment.”

“Hello, Victar,” Razo said, trying to sound casual. “Yes, it’s pretty stale.”

Razo was not in the mood to keep up with Victar’s chatting. The mystery still bound his hands; his mind was limping and no closer to a conclusion. After a few moments of inept silence, Dasha stepped in. Razo watched them chat and dug the tip of a sandal between two paving stones.

“Come here a moment,” Enna said in her carefully even tone. Razo tensed, anticipating some rebuke. Instead of scolding, Enna drew inward a bit, as though some buried sadness wrapped a string around her attention and tugged.

“Razo,” she whispered, “I’ve got a thought, and I’m hoping I’m wrong. Tell me what the bodies looked like.”

Razo sniffed with one nostril. “Couldn’t you ask me something pleasanter? Like, say, what I’d like for lunch? . . . No? Well, they’re black. Stiff, charred, unrecognizable.”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t think they were actually murdered, Razo. Not *set* on fire, as such.”

“Believe me, they were burned, sometimes still smoking.”

“But it sounds like . . . like Leifer.” Her eyes flashed to his briefly. She meant her brother, who had used his talent with fire-speaking in the first battle of the war and grew so hot with it that he had burned to death. “When the skin’s how you described it . . . it’s not like someone set on fire, more like someone who burned from the *inside.*”

“They burned themselves up?” Razo tugged on his hair. “I’m stumped. I’d been so sure it was Ledel, but now . . . Great crows, Enna-girl, what a hornets’ nest. Anyone could be involved.”

“Including her,” Enna whispered, nodding toward the sound of Dasha laughing with Victar. “She knows I’ve got fire-speaking. I don’t mind telling you, I’m feeling as vulnerable as a goose in the cook’s fist, and I don’t like being scared.”

He inhaled deeply. “I promised during the war I’d watch your back. I’m still keeping that promise, Enna-girl. I swear.”

Enna rubbed his head and left to return to the ambassador. Razo took another decent look at Dasha. She had said she did not know the pale-haired soldier, yet she and Victar seemed friendly enough now. But why would she lie? And if they were friends, perhaps Victar had told Dasha that Razo was just a Forest boy and how that meant that he was poor and lowly and should not be dangling himself around a noble girl’s shoulders.

A clack of wood drew Razo’s attention to the training ring. Ledel was practicing sword with his secondman, and his eyes looked hollow and bruised with sleeplessness. Razo rubbed a self-conscious hand through his hair to check for forgotten bits of hay and thought, *Four days left.*

24

A Parchment Map

The next day, Razo wore his plain white clothes and skulked around Thousand Years. Once, Ledel left the palace grounds alone, and with a dry mouth and antsy heartbeat, Razo followed the captain from a respectable distance. He lost sight of him just west of the heart and skittered around side streets for hours, anxious at the sound of his own footsteps and wishing he'd asked Enna and Finn to help spy.

But I can't get her any closer to the danger, he reminded himself, *or she might burn again.*

After lugging himself back to Thousand Years, he skipped dinner to collapse on his cot for a quick snooze.

When he woke, feeling tumbled and giddy and half-dead, he found he'd slept through both evening and night. In the distance, the bell tolled dawn with a mockingly happy *ping.* Razo lurched out of bed, still in clothes and sandals, and rubbed his eyes fiercely, in the way his mother used to say would wake up his brain. The assembly would vote for war in two days.

Half-asleep, he jumped back into his routine of walking a broad circle around Ledel's barracks. It had rained in the night, and the fat worms lay gasping on the paving stones. Razo was hopping around, trying not to squash them, when he saw Tumas prowling the early morning.

Razo slid between two bushes, earning a mouthful of cedar greens. Far ahead, Tumas entered the abandoned barracks where Razo had taught Dasha slinging. He stayed inside just a few moments before leaving again. He was coming awfully near Razo's hiding spot. Nearer still. Razo held his breath and tried to look like a tree.

Tumas veered, heading in the direction of the Thousand Years west gate. Razo spat green and waited until the pork-chop-eared soldier had gone a good distance before bustling out to follow.

And then he jumped right back between the trees.

There was another of Ledel's men entering those same empty barracks. He stayed a bit longer than Tumas, then left again, also empty-handed, and took Tumas's path toward the west gate.

Razo made sure no one else paraded down the path, then slid from tree to tree, behind buildings, moving in the flow of early-morning errand runners, and came at the building from the back side.

He stole a look through a window. Nobody home.

The stale odor accosted him, cots rotting where they stood, all silent in mourning the dead. The floor was dusty, and he could see footprints muddling around a cot near the opposite door. So as not to leave his own marks, Razo leaped from cot to cot until he came to that spot. He sat down, heard a crinkle, and leaned over the edge. Between the thin straw mattress and the slats, someone had stuck a parchment. Razo pulled it out.

There was a crude drawing but also a lot of script. He cursed, wishing not for the first time that he knew his letters. He'd have to get some help.

Then voices. Razo skipped across a few more bunks and slid beneath one. Dust stirred around his face, and a fat brown spider ambled out of his way. He pinched his nose, stifling a sneeze, then heard people enter.

A rustle at the lifting of a straw mattress, a sigh of old wood.

"It's supposed to be here. The captain said Tumas would leave it under the third cot."

"Captain hinted the new place would be downriver from the old. Maybe we can just sniff around and find it."

"On all that riverbank? Not a chance. I'm certain he said the third cot, but we had better check them all."

Razo swallowed.

"No, don't bother. That dunce Malroy probably took it with him. Maybe he'll show it to Lord Belvan and ask for directions."

The men laughed.

"Well, the captain will be busy enough without us today. He's invited half the company. Why so many? I asked him. He wouldn't say, but Tumas whispered to me that the captain's getting impatient with just a body here, a body there. Plans an all-out attack, wants as many warriors as he can trust. Tumas hinted it had something to do with the assembly, but I don't . . ."

The voices moved away. Razo whined with another strangled sneeze.

He waited, hurting his brain with the effort of trying to hear new voices or footsteps, and glared at the fleas dropping from the filthy mattress onto his arms. His thoughts drifted, tangled in the skittish movements of a spider.

Ledel did not have fire-speaking.

One of his men did, but he was not the fire-speaker from the festival.

That soldier had said, *The captain invited half the company . . .*

Weeks ago after a feast day, Belvan's men had found an empty warehouse littered with burned wood.

Two men were missing from Ledel's company, supposedly to join Manifest Tira, but Razo recalled that Ledel was the one who had claimed that. So where were they, really?

And that first day, when Ledel's and Talone's companies sparred on the training ground, Ledel had said, *. . . we'll see how well they perform as soldiers without the fire fighting for them.* Initially, Razo had taken the comment as an insult, an insinuation that the Bayern were just the lackeys of a fire-witch. But as he heard it now in memory, he realized there had been jealousy, a twinge of sadness on the word *soldiers,* of longing with *fire.*

So, two of Ledel's men were gone, and Enna said the corpses had most likely burned themselves to death. Razo shuddered. That captain was up to something very, very bad.

Razo poked his head out, slithered from under the cot, and stepped from bunk to bunk to the door. When the area seemed clear, he ran to the palace. The parchment crackled under his tunic.

Enna was gone. Conrad was guarding the ambassador's chambers, and he reminded Razo that today was yet another feast day, the day of apple cakes.

"For women only. From what I gathered, Enna and Lady Megina joined the assemblywomen and others at the heart, making apple cakes and griping about men, no doubt. Finn and Talone will be hovering nearby and wishing they could have some cake. Maybe they'll toss 'em a core. As it was, they had to get special permission from Lord Belvan to let the men go at all. There was some rather intriguing talk of dressing Finn and Talone in skirts. . . ."

Conrad laughed. Razo disappointed himself by not being able to get his own laugh past the rock in his throat. Another feast day. A thought shocked him like touching static metal. *The bodies have been appearing after feast*

days. Ledel must go someplace that's emptied because of the day off and teach his men to burn.

"Any idea when they'll be back?" asked Razo.

"Evening or night. Enna's sour expression told me that it promised to be a long day."

"Conrad, do you know your letters?"

Conrad snorted. "Not likely."

Razo thought of going to the prince for help—surely the man knew how to read—but no, he would not allow suspicion of Dasha to squash and squeeze him.

She had not joined the feast day celebrants yet and was still in her rooms, breakfasting on bread dipped in a greenish oil, olives, and cold ham. Razo gave her the parchment, sat on the floor, and took over the meal. He could not help whimpering a bit as he ate. It was a cruel, cruel mission that denied him his five meals a day.

"It's a map," she said.

Razo had figured that. He winced as he bit into an intensely sour olive. There was something satisfying about food too bitter or spicy to eat without a grimace, making him feel as though he'd accomplished some difficult physical feat.

"You really never learned to read? Well, the scribbles are directions to the Rosewater River, west side, lower docks near the river mouth. It's all shipping warehouses that far down the Rosewater. One of my father's warehouses is in that area. So, when do we go?"

She smiled, her eyebrows up.

He swallowed his bite of ham. "We?"

"Come on. I shared my breakfast with you."

"Dasha, I don't think . . . I'm just going to scout it out, and scouting's better with one. . . . I'm not even going to ask Conrad to come because . . . I mean, we could be seen, and there're fire-speakers on the loose . . . um, no."

"Hm." She pursed her mouth, looked at her fingernails. "You know the assembly court requires two witnesses to support an accusation. I suppose you have some other Tiran to go with you?"

"Oh."

By the time Razo had finished the breakfast platter, she was ready. He had insisted she wear something drab and unassuming, so she replaced her

Bayern-dyed blue lummas for a quiet peach one and took the silver butterfly pins out of her hair. She combed it and plaited it on each side, and he watched, as mesmerized as though his gaze were caught in the melting gold of a campfire.

"Something wrong?"

Razo blinked. "Huh? Uh, no, let's go."

He thought of trying to get to Enna, Finn, and Talone, but he knew how the heart was during other feast days. During one festival, he'd not been able to actually walk through and had moved by leaning into the crowd, traveling slug slow as the people adjusted around him. That would waste hours—Ledel might move locations by then. No, he had to go now, before someone else died. He would not try anything foolish, just peep a bit, like his old scouting missions during the war.

In and out, nobody hurt.

25

A Slinger and a Spy

Dasha was chatty at first, and Razo tried to follow her conversation, but his thoughts were looping, his muscles twitching for action. By the time they had skirted the chaotic stirrings in the heart, he realized she had been silent for some time.

"Why didn't you go with the other women this morning?" he asked as they hurried down a side street.

"I was in no rush to arrive." She shrugged. "I've had apple cakes before."

A doubt tickled him, a flea bite in his mind. He ignored it.

The morning was dirty gray, the sky musty with clouds. All the women were in the heart, the men and children home, and business on hold for the sake of the feast day, leaving the streets sad and empty. The mood was lashing around Razo, and he felt tethered by anticipation.

They crossed the last bridge over the Rosewater and continued south, civilization beginning to thin out. For long stretches, the west bank of the Rosewater was weedy and desolate, dotted with isolated shacks. The mouth of the river widened toward the peculiar flatness of the gray sea, and the banks became messy with docks in different phases of newness and decay. Warehouses crammed together, elbowing for a bit of river side.

In case of an unexpected plunging into the river or other mishap that could damage parchment, Razo had left the map with Conrad, so Dasha was looking for landmarks from memory.

"That one . . . No, wait, that's it. That's the one."

They hunkered behind some crates at an adjacent building and watched for guards before moving in closer. The wooden docks scraped the banks as the water heaved up and down in a tired rhythm, the wet breath of river sloshed against the shore, an open door clacked in the wind. No human

sounds. Then the wind blowing off the ocean shifted, swooping between them and the warehouse. Razo smelled smoke.

They dashed from their hiding place and crouched beneath the warehouse window. Razo inched up to peer through the slats and felt Dasha move beside him.

There was Ledel, sitting at a table in the nearly empty building, looking over a book. Two soldiers stood behind him, one his secondman, the other the young soldier Dasha and Enna had identified as a fire-speaker. Crates in various stages of ash were stacked and flung in every corner. Ledel pointed at an empty crate in the center of the room. The young soldier's squinty-eyed expression became even more crooked in his concentration, and a hiss of smoke puttered from the crate's corner. Ledel shook his head and gave some command to his secondman. Now the crate ruptured with flames.

Razo turned his back to the wall and slid down to sit. Dasha was beside him.

"Did you see?" he whispered.

She nodded.

"My bet is Ledel tried to learn fire-speaking himself and failed, and so enlisted others," said Razo, thoughts pulling through him like a tug-of-war he was winning. "He must've read about fire-speaking in one of those books and is training some of his men, but not doing such a great job of it. They burn themselves up while trying to learn fire-speaking, and then he makes use of their deaths by planting the bodies near the Bayern to increase public suspicion. Ingridan will believe there's a Bayern fire-witch running rampant, increasing the desire for war, and after the assembly votes for war, Ledel will have half his crew to offer up as flame-tossing warriors."

Razo's grin at his own cleverness shifted into a grimace, and his voice croaked. "He's making an army of fire-witches, Dasha. He'll set Bayern blazing."

Dasha's eyes were gray-blue today. "We need to tell Lord Belvan and the chief of assembly."

"Right." Tell Lord Belvan, let someone else take care of it. Razo wished he were armed with fire-speaking or wind-speaking, could swing a sword like Finn, could rush in right now and end it. What was he doing here, anyway? A Forest lad, the weakest member of the Own?

You're a slinger and a spy, he reminded himself. *Your job is to find, war scout, not to fight.* He looked at Dasha, her ear cupped to the wall, and felt

glad, at least, not to be alone.

With a warehouse full of danger pressed to their backs, Razo's thoughts jumped to a tiny shack, rain seething outside, his arm around her shoulders. He thought it would feel awfully nice to hold her again like that but reminded himself that she was the prince's intended bride. He tugged playfully on her lummas.

"You were right about coming along. They might not believe a Bayern boy, but a noble Tiran witness . . ."

"And a pretty one at that," she said.

"I didn't say that. I mean, but I will, if you want."

She considered. "Let's get out of here first."

They crept away, testing the quietness of their own toes against stone, and huddled outside the next warehouse.

"I heard something," whispered Dasha.

"I did, too, coming from the way we want to go."

"Let's go back and skirt around. . . ."

"But if we get caught, there's no way out except the river."

"Oh. Well, if we need to, I could make the river a way out for us." She clenched her hands. "If we have to."

Razo nodded. "Only if we have to."

They listened to the uneasy silence, edged out, and sneaked toward the river.

Then came the unmistakable congested grumble of Tumas. "Where in the blazes is it? Captain, you around here?"

In the narrow alley between two warehouses, there was no place to hide. Tumas rounded the corner, his gaze grabbing them.

Dasha cried out and sprinted toward the dock, Razo right behind. The sound of running feet followed. Razo pushed himself harder, loosing the sling at his side.

Before he could get a stone in his palm, a fist came down on his head. He thudded to the ground as he saw Tumas grab Dasha by her hair.

Razo fumbled for his sword, but another set of arms encircled him, lifting his feet from the ground.

"Almotht got away," came the voice of Tumas's friend.

Thick, hairy arms held Razo from behind, pinning his arms to his body. Razo bit into a hand and heard a yelp, but the soldier adjusted to the hangman's hold—arms under his, hands locked behind his head.

Dasha was screaming and kicking in Tumas's arms, and he yanked her head back until she whimpered and stilled. Her neck was exposed, and as Tumas reached for his dagger, Razo understood, with a shock that burned as it burst through him, that Tumas would kill them both.

Tumas looked at his captain, who was standing in the doorway of the warehouse. Ledel's frown was frightening.

"Bring them inside," he said, and disappeared.

The soldiers threw Razo and Dasha on the floor of the warehouse, tied their hands behind their backs, and bound their ankles. Tumas ripped off Razo's sword, sling, and pouch of stones, but just like the assembly guards, he mistook the distance sling cinched around Razo's waist for a common belt.

"Here." Ledel tossed the short sling to his secondman. The tanned, lean soldier held it between two fingers. The ends began to smoke, and he shook it away as it fizzled and trickled into ash.

"Shame," Razo breathed. He had made that sling himself, braided it from the black and white hairs of the sheep he used to watch for the king. He looked at Dasha. Her face was down.

Tumas prodded Razo's gut with his foot. "It's that Bayern boy, the one that put himself on Hemar's knife. Captain, I told you he was no good, always sneaking, looking around more than he ought." He pressed a finger to one nostril and blew out the other. A lump plopped beside Razo's sandal. "How did he find us here?"

"He followed you, no doubt," said Ledel. "How long have you been lumbering around, lost?"

"Not long." Tumas sniffed, embarrassed.

"Look at his girl." The squinty-eyed soldier was squinting now with purpose, his eyes on Dasha. "Isn't she—"

"Lady Dasha." The scar down Ledel's jaw was as white as teeth.

Dasha tossed her head, flicking her braids behind her shoulders. "Captain Ledel, your men tied me up."

"Yes, I did not realize—"

"So now that you realize, why don't you untie me?"

Razo's stomach felt like a chunk of ice.

Ledel crouched beside Dasha, lifted her chin with his finger, a gentle, mentorlike gesture. The hollows beneath his eyes were purple, as though he had not slept in days. "What are you doing with this Bayern boy?"

“He was looking for you, and I wanted to see what he intended to do.”

Ledel rubbed his scar. “But you ran from my men. You kicked Tumas in the face.”

Dasha’s eyelids lowered and twitched back up, a half blink. Relief burst in Razo’s middle. He could read that expression—she was lying to Ledel, which meant she was not working with the burners. But apparently Ledel caught the lie as well.

“I see. You’re on this boy’s side.” Ledel rubbed his eyes and mumbled to himself behind his hand. “I never wanted it to come to this. I would never harm a daughter of Tira. This is all for Tira . . . for Tira.” When he looked back at Dasha, the whites of his eyes were veined with red. “If only you understood. Lady, all of Tira aches for what I can provide—a justification for war. The incomplete conflict rankles this nation like a wound left unstitched and seeping.”

“It was a hard loss,” said Dasha. “But—”

“No, you listen to me.” He was on his knees before her, holding her shoulders. “You nobles make the decisions, but you need to listen to those of us who understand war, who do the work. War is the best tool of civilization. Rules must be followed, or the tool of civilization becomes the catalyst of chaos. Do you understand? The Bayern were the ones who twisted battle out of the ancient pattern of man to man and sword to sword, instead exploiting one fire-witch to burn hundreds. The thought even now brings bile to my mouth.”

“Lovely thought,” Razo mumbled.

“But what you do here,” said Dasha, “you’re taking up the tool you say disgusts you.”

“I know! And I cannot abide my own face for the thought of it. But I love my country more than myself. I will sacrifice my own honor to redeem Tira.” His hands on her shoulders were shaking. “Will you, Lady Dasha?”

The two locked eyes. Razo stared back and forth, his breath too large to come out of his lungs. *Say what he wants so you can get out of here!* he thought.

Dasha blinked. “I will do—”

“Stop. You are going to lie to me again.” Ledel stood, turning his back to her.

“Captain.” Ledel’s secondman stood by his shoulder. “What do we do with her? If we—”

“When all of Tira demands the Bayern be punished for burning Lord Kilcad’s daughter alive,” said Ledel, deadly calm, “he will rush home and demand we resume our war.”

“You hypocritical monster!” Dasha’s voice lifted as though she addressed hundreds. “The assembly will find you out. My father will stab you through the neck in the assembly itself, and all of Ingridan will applaud.”

“Tomorrow night, the assembly will be a smoldering clump of ash.”

“Are we going to burn them, Captain?” asked the young soldier.

Ledel stared at Dasha, his eyes vacant, but his forehead tense as though he were in pain. “Yes, you are going to burn them.”

“But tied up like that, Captain? You have always told us—”

“Soldier!” Ledel pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. His voice softened, pleading. “Yes, you are right. But Bayern’s foul play forces us to make exceptions to the rules. We are running short on time to accomplish our goal. That idiotic Manifest Tira is in very real danger of turning the entire city *against* its cause with its clumsy assassination attempts. Besides, rumors abound that the prince will announce an engagement soon, and the timing suggests he means to take sides. At just the moment when our mission becomes even more urgent, we are offered a means to accomplish it with Lady Dasha’s death.

“If you’re not ready to be a man, I’ll give this task to someone else.” Ledel stared at the soldier until the young man took a step back and shut his mouth. “I’m done waiting for the others. You four are my core warriors, and I need your skills perfected. Perhaps having live targets today will motivate you to—”

“Having more trouble making fire-witches than you’d thought, Captain Ledel?” Razo’s voice scraped out of his throat, as dry as week-old bread.

Ledel did not even look at him, just pointed his gloved hand. “You do not speak, prisoner.”

“Had hopes of a whole army, did you, but they just keep burning themselves up? Just like the rest of you will. What, did he use poor folk at first, but they kept dying?” Ledel was crossing the room to Razo now, picking him up by his neck. “So he decided to use his own men. I count two of you gone already; how long do the rest of you have?”

Ledel punched Razo in the gut and dropped him on the ground face-first.

“What ith he talking about, Captain?” asked the large soldier.

“When Bayern talk, they vomit lies,” said Ledel. “Ignore it. Burn them.”

Tumas grinned, and the secondman cracked his knuckles and stepped forward. The young soldier kept staring at Dasha.

"But . . . but, Captain . . . she's a lady, and a Tiran—"

"Tumas? Tumas, I'm here!" A girl entered the warehouse, smiling sheepishly, sashaying her way to Tumas's side. It was Pela.

"Pela, I told you not to come," Tumas said through gritted teeth.

Ledel growled. "Tumas, why is this girl here? What have you told her?"

Pela sidled up to Tumas, putting a hand on his chest. "I want to learn the fire witchery, Captain Ledel, for Tira—" She recognized Razo and squealed. "Look! I told you that Bayern boy was trouble. He was always asking questions about Captain Ledel and the rest of you. I tried to take care of him for you, I promise I did. I don't know how he survived the bloodbane berries I put in his tart, those Bayern aren't all human. And when I tried to get him caught by Belvan's men in Lady Dasha's chamber—"

"Shut up, will you?" said Tumas. "I told you all this was a secret—"

"But I'm tired of waiting."

Pela and Tumas began talking over each other, and Ledel just stood there and stared at Pela, eyes dark with some thought Razo did not want to guess.

Razo seized the moment to focus around him. No weapon lay within reach. The warehouse doors opened to a gray glimpse of river, too far away to attain at the speed of crawl. He saw that Dasha was staring at the Rosewater, her hands trembling behind her back. In her eyes, Razo saw a little girl running after her grandfather, laughing behind her hand at the marvelous game, then watching as he slouched into the river, facedown.

"Dasha," Razo whispered, "they're going to be shooting heat at us. Enna, she'd use the wind to blow that heat away, cool it off before it could become fire. Could water do something like that?"

"It might, but what you're talking about would take buckets of water." She looked up, her expression somber. "The clouds are heavy today, and I might be able to nudge them to release the rain, but I'd have to be standing out in it to use it right. Maybe the river . . ."

She closed her eyes. Through the open doors, Razo saw the river agitate, the waves flowing side to side, building momentum, getting higher, splashing up on the dock. A small pool formed on the sagging wood platform. Then it started to slide its way toward them, a tiny rivulet running just behind Tumas's back as he argued with Pela. The sweat on Razo's forehead pricked like needles. *Don't look, don't look,* he prayed. The stream

found Dasha's feet and wrapped around her ankles like a cat, curling up and settling into a pool. It fattened, and its edges crawled out, gushing over Razo's toes, up to his ankles.

Razo wanted to ask, *Couldn't you call the river to throw tidal waves at them or something?* But he considered that water was not a weapon like fire, and Dasha had never used her gift for more than idle play.

"That's enough!" said Ledel.

Razo jumped, but the captain was talking to Tumas and Pela. Dasha's eyes opened, the river calmed, the water stopped coming.

Ledel turned his troubled gaze to Dasha, and he pulled a fat dagger from his belt. "Tumas, your friend compromises our safety by coming here. I will show you all that I am not afraid to kill a lady for Tira's sake."

Tumas took one step away from Pela. The pastry girl went very white. Ledel advanced, and she turned to run, but he caught her by her neck and brought the knife down hard. Razo looked away, his eyes burning. He heard Ledel command Tumas to get rid of her body. A few moments later, there was a splash.

"Do you see?" Ledel's eyes were wild, his voice scraping as it rose higher. "That is all it takes. We have killed one daughter of Tira, let's not fight over one more. We are so close, men, so close! Show me you have it in you to take Tira back. Use this opportunity to practice for what's to come. Burn them."

At that precise moment, thunder crashed against the horizon. To Razo, it seemed but the echo of bad news.

26

River and Fire

Might rain soon.” Tumas squinted out the door and up at the sky, apparently unconcerned about Pela’s death. “It’s already soggy in here. Look at that puddle—”

“Are you ready to be a man?” Ledel asked the young soldier. “Or do I release you and ask someone else to burn the boy?”

“No, please, Captain, I apologize. I am ready.”

Razo dropped onto his side and rolled around in the dirty pond. When he looked up again, the soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder ten paces off, as if lined up for target practice. Without warning, the air between Razo and the young soldier rippled and heaved as a column of heat shot forward. Razo buried his face in his arm.

He heard a hiss and peered over his sleeve. The air around him steamed, then trickled into nothing.

Dasha smiled quickly. The sight made Razo’s heart whack his ribs.

Again, the air was a whirlpool of heat that flashed into vapor before Razo’s face, stinging his eyes. He had only a moment to breathe cool air before barreling heat left the secondman as well, tearing toward Razo like a charging bull. Once more the attack exploded into hot spray that nipped Razo’s skin.

“I don’t know what’s happening.” The secondman’s eyes shifted to Dasha. “Let me try the girl.”

“Avoid the face,” said Ledel. “We want her body recognizable.”

“Don’t—” Razo started, but a barrage of shapeless fire was already storming at Dasha. Her hands dug deeper in the water, and the heat exploded into steam. The air was still misty when it trembled anew with heat, and then again and again. Her eyes were closed, her face tensed.

Ledel glared at Razo. “Do the Bayern know something that can counter fire? All three of you at once, target the Bayern boy. Burn him until he breaks apart.”

Razo could not quite rally the nerve to stick out his tongue. The attack was a hurricane of heat, rolling toward him, cresting, then cracking into hot vapor. His wet clothes dried, his face burned as though he’d spent a noon hour staring at the sun. Some strings of heat escaped Dasha’s screen of water and set tiny fires on his clothes. As best he could with bound wrists and ankles, he rolled on the ground, suffocating the fires. Dasha’s pool was drying to thin mud. In desperation, Razo turned his back to the soldiers. He felt a thread of heat set fire to the rope around his wrists.

“What in the seven rivers is going on?” The attack stopped at Ledel’s shout.

Razo held very still while Ledel yelled at his men, letting the rope burn behind his back, biting his lips to blood to keep from yelping. When the pain became unbearable, he sat back, smothering the fire against the dirt. He pulled the rope between his wrists, groaning as it rubbed his blistered skin, and felt the rope fray and then fall away.

“Let me kill him, Captain,” said Tumas. “He might be the only Bayern that can stop their fire.”

Ledel cursed and heaved over the table, scattering his papers and books to the ground. “Fine, we’ll burn the girl’s body later. Just kill them both.”

“Uh,” said Razo.

“Wait,” said Dasha.

Tumas charged, clouted Razo twice on the head, seized his tunic, and shoved, sending him flying. Razo slammed into a stack of crates with an explosion of wood. The blows had set his vision crooked in his head, and the whole room leaned and rolled as though he were underwater.

He was wincing in anticipation of Tumas’s next strike when he heard a slosh and a thud like a large body falling in mud. Tumas grunted. Dasha emitted a little note of delight, no doubt pleased her sudden mud had worked to trip him, but then the others were yelling, grabbing her. When Tumas gained his feet, he went for Dasha.

Razo leaped up, and the broken crates crumbled around him, spilled jars of spices. He ripped the long sling from his waist, fastened it around his hand, and seized a small glass jar for shot. His head felt far away, as though still being pummeled by Tumas’s fists, and his eyes refused to clear, but he

was fairly certain the orange smudge was Dasha, the bulky figure was Tumas, and that he was strangling her perfect neck.

If you ever made one shot in your life, Forest boy . . .

Razo wobbled on his bound legs, spun the sling, and let the shot fly. It cracked as it struck Tumas's skull. Razo heard glass shards tinkle to the ground before the thump of the big man's body. A dusty sweet odor invaded the air—cinnamon.

Ledel had crossed the room before Razo's unsteady vision could detect his movement. "The boy burned his hands free."

There was a blurry swipe of Ledel's sword, and Razo thought he was skewered for sure, but instead the blade nicked the sling from Razo's hand and cut it in two. Razo felt a stitch in his gut. He'd made those slings with his own two hands. He dropped to the ground and started to roll away, but Ledel grabbed a fistful of his hair and hauled him to his feet, holding him forward for the soldiers to see, like a roasted duck on display in the meat market.

"Who checked the boy for weapons? He had a sling, you imbeciles!"

"Tumath ith alive."The large soldier crouched over Tumas. "No, wait, he'th dead."

Ledel's scar turned a livid red, and he shoved Razo into the center of the room. The throbbing in his head, the danger, the ridiculousness of being almost killed again and again, was making Razo feel giddy.

"You are pathetic!" Ledel shouted. "You fail to burn two trussed prisoners while this rodent breaks his bonds on your own fire and kills Tumas."

"You know, you're right, they *are* pathetic," said Razo.

Ledel backhanded Razo's face. He stared at the floor and shut his eyes against the dizzying splurges of light.

"Captain, he *was* doing something sneaky, or maybe it was her." The secondman nudged Dasha with his foot.

"You can't let them. There will always be someone doing something to stop you." Ledel's voice climbed to a pleading range. "The point is, you must be quicker and deadlier. I know you want to see Bayern burn, but wanting isn't enough. You know, I'll just do it myself."

Ledel reached for his sword.

Razo's body seemed to be drowning in the river again, his ears full of its song, and the whole world slowed. His last breath lasted a lifetime,

allowing him a moment to say farewell.

"I like roasted pork," he said quickly. "And vinegar cucumbers, and those barbaric red olives." If he was going to die, he'd better say something worthwhile first. "And Dasha. I like you."

"I like you, too, Razo." Her voice crunched on the words.

Ledel hefted his sword, angled to slice through Razo's neck, but before he could thrust, smoke began to drape from the hilt. Ledel bawled and dropped the weapon, examining his red palm.

"What are you fools—"

"Not them," someone said.

And Razo laughed. He laughed because two figures had just entered through the warehouse's riverside doors, and even though his vision was still a little slurred, the shape and move of them was as familiar to him as the taste of cheese.

"We're bunnies in a box, my lady," Razo whispered.

Enna was walking toward Ledel, scrunching the parchment with the map into a ball, and Finn was beside her, his sword drawn. She tossed the paper ball into the air, where it burst into flame, raining soft ash. Ledel cursed himself.

"Not them," Enna said again. "Me."

And then, wind.

27

Rainstorm

The wind pushed between Razo and Ledel, forcing the warrior back and giving Razo an inch to roll away, grab Dasha, and crawl from under their feet. He saw Ledel dive for his cooling sword and fling himself at Enna, but Finn caught the attack against his own sword, and metal clanged.

"This is your moment!" Ledel hollered at his men as he attacked Finn. "Prove yourselves. Burn the fire-witch!"

Razo freed Dasha's wrists and then attacked the rope at his ankles, his eyes on the fracas. While Finn kept Ledel busy in combat, Enna was facing the three burners. Razo thought grimly that Ledel must be proud of his men now, who seemed to need no greater motivation than a Bayern fire-witch facing them down.

All Razo could see of the fight was a trembling in the air, but he knew Enna was using wind to battle the volleys of heat before they could become fire. Wind zipped and zoomed around them, breaking heat like bread, shoving the warriors into one another. Her eyes were hot, but her face was rigid with fear.

The secondman shouted in frustration and drew his sword, then screamed as the red-hot hilt burned his hand. The large soldier advanced on Enna with his fists, but before he could swing, he stumbled back, his sandals flaming.

"Enna can't . . ." Razo fumbled for his sling and remembered it was gone. "Dasha, if she can't stop them with wind, if she has to burn, if she kills again . . ."

"We'll help her," said Dasha, tugging the rope off her legs. "I need more water, for this I can't use just what's in the air." She stood and ran toward the landside door.

Razo was going to go after her when he saw that a crate near Enna had started to crackle and the hem of her tunic was smoking. Enna was not able

to hold back the fire on her own. Razo scrounged the ground for anything to throw. He hurled a wooden slat, and it slapped the lisping soldier in the face. His eyes turned to Razo.

Razo dove for the ground as a stack of crates behind him erupted with fire. Slapping flames out of his clothes, he found himself surrounded by burning rubble. He dropped lower, trying to get under the smoke.

Thunder sounded again, clashing with the ache in his head. The sky dimmed as though someone had blown out a candle; the day became gray wool, and then, rain. Through the landside doors, he could see Dasha standing in the rain, her face up, her palms open.

She's done it, she's called the rain down, Razo thought.

He glimpsed water oozing down the faces of the soldiers who battled Enna, into their eyes, soaking their clothes. They swiped at it madly.

"What the . . .We've been discovered!" Someone cried from the landside doors.

Razo shouted warning to Dasha as another of Ledel's men arrived. He tried to kick his way clear of the blazing debris, smoke choking the air, and watched helpless as the soldier ran at Dasha, swinging his sword.

Suddenly, the rain clotted before Dasha's body, slowing the sword, pushing it away. The soldier stumbled but spun around and attacked again. Once more the raindrops thickened, twisted, and slowed the blow. Dasha cried out as the sword's flat side struck her shoulder. The soldier tossed his sword aside and reached through the rain for Dasha's neck. Water rolled from her hair and face, over his hands, up his arms, and into his mouth and nose. Razo could see him gurgling, spitting water, drowning where he stood.

Razo finally cleared his burning barrier and bolted for Dasha. Another errant wave of heat rushed over his head. He dove for the ground and felt the heat singe his hair. Without Dasha's help, Enna was struggling against the three burners.

When Razo looked back toward Dasha, he saw the soldier spring forward, knocking Dasha under the roof of the warehouse. Razo gained his feet and sprinted, aiming to ram the man into the wall.

Dasha held out her palms. The soldier twisted back to punch Dasha but paused, his face contorting. Razo faltered.

"What're you . . . ?" Razo saw now that sweat was beading on the man's face, on his hands, dripping, huge globs of water streaming from his skin. A

gurgling noise bubbled out of his throat. She was pulling water right out of the man's body.

"Dasha . . ." Razo put a hand on her arm, trying to still her. "Careful, Dasha. Easy."

The look on her face was too close to how Enna had looked there at the end of the war—eyes pained, but face void of expression. He took her hand.

"He's subdued, Dasha. You can stop."

Dasha's hands lowered. The soldier slumped over his feet, coughing, face white, lips blue. Razo found rope and tied him. Dasha's limbs trembled, her steps wobbling as she walked back into the rain.

"Sit down. Rest," he said.

She shook her head. "We're not done." She crumpled, and Razo caught her under her arms and stood behind her, his arms around her waist to hold her up.

Dasha was right—it was not over yet. Through the rain, he could see the terror tight in Enna's face and how her hands trembled, and he knew she was not as strong with wind as she was with fire. It would be so much easier for her to just burn those men. A cord of heat escaped the wind and scorched Finn's pantleg as he battled Ledel.

"Hold on, Enna-girl," Razo called out.

Water massed again on the brows of the three burners, poured down their faces, over their hands, soaking up the heat, taking the bitterness from their attacks. Still they fought. Enna's wind speech seemed spent, and she was using her fire-speaking to stop them now. Instead of brushing away their attacks of heat, Razo guessed that she was pulling the heat into herself and setting the fire loose elsewhere. Soon spurts of flames were rupturing the air around her and breaking the hard dirt floor. Broken crates crackled until water doused them into gusts of black smoke.

At last, the young soldier was slackening and looking eager to be defeated. Ledel's secondman knelt on the ground, still fighting but groaning in pain. The lisping soldier collapsed onto the now muddy floor, gasping for breath.

Razo felt a shudder ripple through Dasha like lightning through the sky.

"That's probably good now," he whispered. "I think Enna can handle the rest."

The rain faltered, then drizzled away. Dasha turned to put her head on Razo's shoulder, tucked her hands on his chest, her body trembling like a

candle flame. He pulled her close and rubbed her arms. Her skin was ice.

He brought her back under the roof just as the young soldier fell to the ground, his head in his hands. The second-man was lying face-first, his back shaking as though he either wept or laughed. The lisping soldier slumped down, and Enna put her foot on his back and called to Razo to bring rope.

But Finn and Ledel's sword fight still thundered on. Neither lagged or swayed with fatigue. They seemed to be trapped in a contest of perfect balance.

"Finn, let me," said Enna, her fingers dancing with impatience on her skirt.

Finn's expression supplied no response, his eyes never leaving his opponent.

He can win, Razo thought. *He's the best sword I ever saw.* And he wanted Finn to win, on his own, to show Ledel, to show Enna, too. But he knew all it would take was one delayed block, one slip in the mud, and Ledel's blade could find its mark. It seemed not such a bad thing to let Enna do what she did best.

"Let her, Finn," said Razo. "Please."

The two warriors locked swords up to the hilts, their faces close together. Finn shoved Ledel and stumbled backward. They paused, looking at each other from across the room, their swords ready. Neither charged.

Ledel's eyes left Finn for the first time. He took in the sight of the big soldier, cussing and spitting, trussed like a hog. Dasha was binding the young man's wrists with half of Razo's distance sling. The secondman had stopped trembling, but he did not bother to lift his face from the mud. The last soldier, still pale and blue lipped, lay tied by the door.

In a movement quick as a wasp, Ledel flung his sword at Enna, but a wind shoved the sword off course and into the pile of broken crates. Then everything about Ledel's face that Razo thought of as his captainness pulled down. His scar changed from impressive to ugly, his jaw did not seem so fine and square, his shoulders narrowed, his chest caved. He howled and fell to his knees, covered his face in his hands, and sobbed.

The former captain did not fight back when Finn secured him with his own lummas. Once he was immobile, Ledel's crying subdued into shaking breath, and that eerie silence tickled Razo from his scalp to his bum. He scratched.

The four of them stood together, turning around, looking at the bound soldiers lying all over the room. The strange after-rain sunlight, sharp as needles, shot through the doors, glaring brilliant on the Tiran white clothing.

"I think I figured out who the murderer is," said Razo.

Enna was wide-eyeing the situation, her fingers on her lips. She whispered something.

"What was that?" asked Razo.

"I didn't kill any." She turned around again, memorizing the scene, her face solemn. "I had to keep them fighting, you know. Until their fire was used up. So that they couldn't burn, not until we got them back to the palace and safe. In a stone dungeon. And I think it worked. My skin got numb to the wind after a while. I had to burn to keep them from striking me, but just . . . just a little. Not kill. We didn't have to kill anybody. Except that one—is that lump there Tumas?—but he was dead when we got here." She walked over to Finn, her face just a handsbreadth from his. She put her hands on his chest and exhaled. "I did it. I kept my promise."

"I love you so much," said Finn, his eyes full of Enna.

She squealed in joy, and he hugged her and spun her around as she declared that she did it, she'd done it. And when they stopped spinning, they started kissing. Razo realized he had never seen them kiss before. He tried not to watch, but the sight of people kissing drew his eyes like a fistfight in a marketplace or a gurgling baby smiling right at him. When he tore his gaze away, he felt even more awkward when it fell on Dasha.

She was smiling at Enna and Finn, her nose crinkled.

"Let's leave them to, uh, *guard,*" said Razo, "and we can fetch Lord Belvan."

Lord Belvan, Razo had said, but he was mostly thinking about Talone. *I did it,* he would say to Talone. *We did. It's done.* He might even hop up and down as Enna had, but without the kissing Finn part.

Razo and Dasha left the warehouse and walked along the riverbank, all panic drained from their feet. The rain had stopped. Sun and bright dashes of blue sky melted through the clouds, and the warmth dried their clothes. Purple bruises encircled Dasha's neck, one bulged on her cheek, and her sleeve was torn at the shoulder. Razo knew he looked no better. Funny that he felt like crowing.

Dasha took his hand, careful not to touch the burns on his wrists, and swung their arms back and forth. The motion made Razo realize how alive he still was. He felt like saying something obvious.

"I'm glad we didn't die."

She adjusted her fingers around his hand to get a firmer grip. Though she held only his hand, somehow he felt her touch in his chest, in his gut, in his head.

"We almost did, though, didn't we?" she said. "That would not have been fun."

"No, not really. Would you prefer to be killed or maimed?"

"Killed . . . no, wait. Maimed how?"

"Lose an arm but still live."

"Maimed. Would you prefer to lose an arm or your face?"

"If I lost my face, could I still eat?"

This discussion lasted them their journey home. They crossed two rivers before finding a penny wagon still running on a feast day. The heart was subdued, empty of both business and celebrants, the festivities cut short by rain. The uncannily sweet fragrance of apples stained the air, a lingering scent that emanated from everywhere, as though the white stones themselves were the fruit's opened flesh. It seemed a small miracle that the rain had not washed the smell away, the kind of wonder that filled Razo's chest with *ahh.* Like the curiosity of rain laced with sunshine. Like the marvel of picking ripe fruit right from a tree. He liked being with Dasha and having these thoughts at the same time. It felt natural, in the way that dancing goes with music.

His mouth was full of other questions for her. *Would you really marry the prince? Do you think a person can decide to love only one girl his whole life, then lose her, then find someone else he loves more and change his mind? Do you think that's possible?*

Instead he asked, "Would you prefer being baked to death under the sun or eaten alive by ants?"

Dasha did not have a chance to answer. They were passing through the gates of Thousand Years, Lord Belvan found them, and the bedlam of a crisis solved sucked them into meetings and testimonials until they were spat out again just in time to sup and sleep.

When night pulled down over his ears, Razo burrowed in his cot, his arms around his face. His bandaged wrists smelled of greasy burn ointment,

his sleeves still whiffed of smoke, and on his skin lay the thin, cold smell of apples.

28

A New Ship in Port

Razo woke to the sound of rain pouncing on the barracks roof. Thunder hissed and lightning scratched the sky, then the rain calmed and curled up, intending to stay. The purr of storm drowned out the hourly bells, and Razo found he could roll over and dream some more. He slept until noon. When his stomach and curiosity finally sent him running to the pastry kitchen, a few minutes of floor sweeping earned him a plate of painfully spicy fish patties and a bucketful of news. The girls talked over one another, practically skipping about with the happy tidings of a fresh scandal.

"Never mind the weather, Razo, business in the heart will be brisk all day. No one could rest comfortably at home when scandals are afoot."

"It's simply too juicy—Captain Ledel and many of his men arrested, one killed, several trained as fire-witches . . ."

"A conspiracy to frame the Bayern, Lord Kilcad's daughter herself an eyewitness and nearly a victim . . ."

"This will be a trial that ruins nobles and military men and catapults attorneys into assembly seats."

Razo wiped a tear sparked by the awe-inspiring spice in his food. "From all I've heard, Tiran attorneys are slipperier than sausages. Any chance Ledel could get off?"

The pastry chef shook her head. "I doubt it. The city already hates the man for his duplicity, and public opinion is half of any trial."

He was not eager to share the news of Pela but finally told all, including the poisoned pastry and her murder. The kitchen went so quiet, all he could hear was the hearth fire nipping at the wood. A quick scan of the faces—surprised, sickened, solemn—made him believe that Pela had been acting alone.

That afternoon, Razo shared the pastry girls' assessment with Talone in Megina's receiving room, where they drank purple grape juice as thick as food and watched the rain smear the world away.

Megina nodded, her eyes on the blurry world outside the shutters. "I've made some mistakes. . . ."

"Megina," said Talone.

She shook her head. "There were times when I was too cautious, particularly after Veran was murdered. Razo was an ambassador for the people I couldn't reach. I'm trying to say thank you." Megina smiled. "And I have more good news. This morning, three separate citizens offered up the names and locations of the remnants of Manifest Tira. The chief of assembly told me the informers had known of Manifest Tira and their plans for some time. When asked why they came forward now, all three mentioned the disgrace of a military leader trying to trick the public into war. Two also cited the rumors that the prince's choice of bride would cement relations with Bayern."

"Razo, you're friendly with the prince," said Talone. "Do you know whom he intends to marry?"

"No, I don't." Frustration seeped through his words. Talone apparently mistook it as anger for not having better information.

"No matter, Razo. If you never discover another secret, your duty to Bayern has been paid in full. And I'm grateful to you, son."

Razo could not help but grin foolishly. Talone's compliment put him in hasty danger of crowing like a rooster and strutting along the back of the sofa, so he changed the subject.

"What about Enna, Captain? Ledel and his burners, down in their dungeon, know that she's—"

"Last night, Megina told Lord Belvan about Enna. He's taken it upon himself to be the only person to interrogate the prisoners, and he has assured us that he will keep Enna's secret until she leaves for Bayern with the next traveling party. She will be safe."

The next day, the assembly voted for peace.

The celebration banquet was subdued, more an exhale of relief than a shout of joy. Only the prince was all sparkling eyes and graciousness.

"Razo's-Own! Of course you single-handedly used those villains' faces to clean your sandals. Pardon me, I meant to say, perhaps *handedly* but

certainly not *single,* or so I have heard. Well done, Lady Dasha."

"Thank you, Radiance."

Dasha smiled at the prince, and Razo watched her nose very carefully for any signs of crinkling. She was polite, but she did not oversmile or ask the prince if he would prefer to be horsewhipped or pecked to death by tiny fish. Razo took this as a good sign, until an exuberant Victar swept Dasha into his entourage and got her laughing at a face puppet he had carved from an apple. Now there was definitive nose creasing.

The very next day, Razo was leaving the barracks for the palace when he spotted Dasha's orange hair across the courtyard. He jogged toward her, intent on pinning her down about the prince and marriage once and for all, but she cut off his greeting.

"Can't talk now, Razo. I have something I have to do."

"What is it?" he asked. "Maybe I could help."

"Uh, sorry, it's nothing really, but someone is waiting for me, and I can't . . . I'll see you later, all right?"

Razo watched her twitter away and felt as though someone had whipped a tree branch into his gut.

"Razo!" Enna hurried toward him. "Have you seen Finn?"

"Finn's gone, too?"

"What do you mean, 'gone, too'?"

"Nothing, it was a stupid thought, never mind."

"I can't imagine where he's . . . he used to be so . . . it's like he's pushing me away on purpose, like he really wasn't . . ." Enna's interest in scanning the horizon faltered. Her eyes fell to her ragged fingernail. "Never mind, you don't want to hear this." She cleared her throat. "I wanted to tell you something else. Your friend Dasha, she did well, you know? She distracted the burners with the water, keeping them from slipping fire past me to hurt you or Finn. And soaking the scoundrels like she did probably saved them from burning themselves out."

"I think it was hard for her." Razo chose his words carefully, aware that if he played it wrong, Enna's current agreeable state could vanish in a huff. "She got really spooked when her grandfather drowned himself. She pretends not to worry, but I know she's fully anxious that what she did back there will plunge her headfirst into his fate."

Enna nodded. Razo suspected she understood more than he did.

“I looked over the book Ledel had found on fire-speaking,” said Enna. “It’s ridiculous, just fragments of ideas and none of it clear about exactly how to push all the heat back out of you again. No wonder they burned themselves up. If there’s bad information out there, someone desperate, like Dasha, say, could stumble on it and try to learn fire speech and get herself burned. What I’m saying is, I’ll teach her.”

Razo leaned back against a tree and breathed out. “That’s about the best . . .Will you really, Enna-girl? Really?”

“Yes, of course.” Enna smiled her good smile. “When the weather chased us away from the apple cakes festival, Conrad was all anxious about you, said you tried to act composed but your worry was pretty easy to read, and he showed me and Finn your map, said he was supposed to keep it safe for evidence or something but thought you might need our help now instead. Right when he said that, it was like something struck me. There aren’t many people in the world I trust, but you’re one of them, and if you say that Dasha’s trustworthy, even though she’s Tiran, and if you say she’ll do good with it, then I believe you.”

“Thanks, Enna.” He smiled, showing off the space between his teeth. “So, what is happening with you and Finn? Are you still . . . ?”

“I don’t know, Razo.” Her voice dried up, and she shook her head as she left.

Razo hurried the opposite way, following the direction Dasha had gone. He had to know. He skulked outside her chamber, listening. No voices, no sound but the clatter and ting of a harp played dreadfully. Was Dasha plucking it with her toes? The noise jarred Razo like his teeth scraping metal, and he waited by the door, arms folded. A serving boy with a tray sneered at him as he approached, nudging him out of the way to knock.

“Lady, I have the food and drinks you called for.”

Dasha opened the door, her cheeks turning red when she saw Razo. Behind her in the room, he could see Finn, seated with his back to the door. Without a word, Razo left.

He wandered the palace grounds, kicking loose rocks hard enough to bruise his toes. He stooped to pick up an egg-shaped stone to add to his pouch, remembered Ledel had destroyed his slings, and hurled it into a whitewashed tree planter.

“There you are!” Conrad jogged toward him. “Talone sent me to find all the Bayern stragglers. We’re meeting at the stables in half an hour. You’ll

never guess—Isi and Geric are in port!”

“Something good today, anyway . . .”

“What do you mean? What’s—”

“Never mind. Conrad, could you go tell Lady Dasha? She’s in her chamber. I’m going to go fetch His Radiance.”

“Excellent!” said the prince when Razo extended the invitation. “I was very much in the mood for an outing. A man needs to stretch his legs, see the world! Now, who is it again we are going to see?”

The prince did not ride horses, so a carriage was assembled. Finn and Dasha showed up late, Finn going to Enna’s side as though all were normal. When he rested his hand on his sword hilt, Razo noticed Finn’s fingers were red in the very same places where Dasha sported harping calluses.

The docks were lively and jammed, heavily salted from the briny air and the sweat of sailors. One ship in the harbor bore a banner carrying Bayern’s sun and crown. A rowboat worked the waters toward shore, Isi and Geric on the bow, their cheeks tanned from the sun. Shouts of greeting erupted from both sides.

“Hello!” Geric waved, full of energy. “Well, that was very pleasant. No reason for the travel to take two months—we spent six days on horseback, two days on a river, four days on the ocean, and here we are!”

“It’s not always so fast, Your Majesty,” said a bearded man whose face was as weathered as oak bark. His accent was crisp, his words lilting up, marking him as a man from Kel, Bayern’s northeastern neighbor. “That was an abominably good wind we followed.”

“Just happened to have a good wind, did you?” said Enna.

She and Isi exchanged devious looks.

As soon as Geric’s foot touched soil, Conrad leaped at him, pulling him into a grappling hold. Enna was the first to grab Isi coming down the plank.

“Where’s Tusken? He must be huge!”

“Poor lamb, we had to leave him home! I know, I know, but I couldn’t inflict that journey on a one-year-old. Finn, I cajoled your mother out of her Forest house and into the palace for once. I couldn’t trust my boy to anyone but Gilsa.”

“I can’t believe you actually left him!” said Enna. “You must feel wretched.”

“Wretched and lonely and torn in half, but if you think *I’m* suffering . . .” Isi glanced back at Geric, who now had Conrad in a choke hold, and

lowered her voice. “You should’ve seen Geric. The first two nights away, he actually—”

“What are you telling them?” Geric looked at her suspiciously.

“Nothing!” said Isi with an impish smile. “Nothing. I’m not saying a peep.”

Geric released Conrad and shook his hands out in front of him with a gesture of defeat. “All right, all right, I might’ve been upset—”

“Upset? He sobbed!”

“—but I’m no more upset than any father would be. It’s not that I don’t trust Gilsa, but . . .” Geric had to pause for emotion. “But he’s my boy.”

Enna stared openmouthed, as though she saw some strange new creature in a menagerie. “He’s more heartbroken than you are, Isi.”

“I know! Who knew Bayern men were so demonstrative?” She pulled Geric in to kiss him.

Enna’s glance slid ever so briefly to Finn, and Razo thought again of her saying, *Why don’t you make a fool of yourself for me?*

Then someone stepped off the boat whom Razo had never met before. Someone as yellow-haired as Isi.

“What a sight!” she said, holding her hands to her chest and taking in Ingridan as though she drank honeyed milk. “It’s positively delicious. Look, I can see three rivers from here. How many are there again?”

“Seven, my dear. Seven rivers.” The prince stepped from the shade of his carriage. He looked striking, his green- and blue-dyed clothing brilliant against the backdrop of white city and red-tiled roofs.

“Isi, Geric,” said Razo, “may I introduce His Radiance, the prince of Tira.”

“Oh!” said Isi. “This is wonderful.”

“A pleasure, sir,” said Geric.

“Please, Radiance,” said Isi, “allow me to name to you my sister, Napralina-Victery Talianna Isilee, second daughter of the queen of Kildenree. She was visiting us in Bayern when Lord Kilcad suggested we travel to Tira to address the assembly before their vote. We passed a trader ship en route who gave us the news—we missed the vote but are here in time for the celebration!”

“I could not be more delighted.” The prince crossed his hands on his chest and bowed his head in a pleased and solemn manner that Razo had never before seen on his face.

Napralina curtsied prettily. She had the light eyes and happy smile of someone who has never known hardship and thinks the whole world a bunch of grapes. Razo was thinking her eyes were not as interesting as Dasha's when Isi gave him a significant look.

"Oh!" said Razo, understanding.

"Oh, what? What is it?" asked the prince, looking around eagerly as though afraid to miss whatever spectacular thing Razo had discovered.

"Oh, nothing, oh, it's getting hot out here under the sun. Oh . . ." Razo fidgeted. "Oh, I mean, Radiance, why don't we walk back to the palace? You could show Princess Napralina the docks and such."

"Splendid idea, Razo's-Own! I was weary of the carriage. Come, my dear," he said, extending an arm to Napralina. "Those ships there with seven sails are from the Wasking Islands. You'll adore the Wasking. They have the most musical accents. Nom, do say something so she can admire!"

They walked away, accompanied by the prince's Wasking entourage. Geric was speaking with Talone, Megina, and Dasha, so Isi, Razo, Enna, and Finn took a moment to huddle together. Isi locked arms with Enna and Razo beside her. Razo noticed that though Enna and Finn stood side by side, they did not touch.

"Napralina was telling me how bored she was with Kildenree," Isi said, barely moving her lips. "How she wished Geric had a brother, how much she would like to become a princess of a foreign land."

All their eyes followed the pair.

"And then you got Enna's letter, huh?" asked Razo. "About finding a bride for the prince?"

"It was Razo's idea," said Enna.

"Seems like it was a good one," said Finn.

Razo thought so, too.

"Do you think it'll work, Razo?" asked Isi.

Razo considered. The prince's choices resonated with the citizens of Ingridan. Even so, marrying a Bayern woman when feelings were still tender could cause havoc among some groups. But an attachment to the queen of Bayern's Kildenrean sister—unmistakable side taking without the risk of going too far. He wondered what name Napralina would give the prince.

"I think it could be rotten great."

29

A Few More Secrets

Razo had not worn his old brown uniform since first adopting the Tiran clothing. He vaguely recalled rolling it up in a ball and stuffing it into Enna's wardrobe some months back, so he stopped there a couple of nights after Isi and Geric's arrival to prepare for their welcoming banquet. Finn was who-knows-where again, but Enna was in her room, sticking little silvery things in her hair the way the Tiran ladies did. Apparently, her distaste of all things Tiran had begun to wane.

He grabbed his ball of wrinkled uniform and ducked behind Enna's dressing screen to get presentable. He thought he would like to look good tonight, all laid out in his Bayern army splendor. Just to honor Isi and Geric. No other reason.

He pulled on his leggings. That is, he pulled them halfway on. He could yank them up his thighs, but the bottoms left his ankles bare like little-boy knickers.

"What mischief's this?"

He wrenched his long-sleeved tunic over his head and tugged down. The hem used to hit the tops of his thighs, but it barely covered his waist, and the chest and shoulders were so tight that he had to pull himself tall just to breathe. And then, of course, his boots proved too short for his toes. He glared at the back of Enna's head, then had to laugh. It was a pretty solid prank.

"Ha-ha!" he said, emerging. "Do you like my new attire?"

Enna's eyes widened as Razo strutted a little circle. She choked, then leaned forward to laugh as though her delight were so heavy that it weighted her chest. He pranced on his toes as he imagined girls must do when showing one another new dresses.

“Tight tunic and short leggings, the newest Bayern fashion,” he said in a high voice. “It’s an Enna specialty.”

“I can’t take credit, though I wish I could,” said Enna, still laughing.

Razo ceased flouncing and set his features to look dead serious. “Don’t play, Enna-girl. You can’t make me believe Finn did this.”

“Finn? What’re you . . . ? Razo, it’s you.”

Razo re-firmed his expression to be even more deadly.

Enna barked a surprised laugh. “Don’t you realize, you Forest yokel? You hit a growth spurt this year.”

“Please, I’m not as gullible as I used to be. This’s another of your tricks, like the short stirrups on my saddle.”

Enna put out her hands as if to say, *What can I do if you don’t believe me?*

Razo snorted. “I’m eighteen years now, and my brothers stopped growing when they were . . .” How old had they been? Sixteen, seventeen? His clothing had seemed tighter these past months. Was it possible that all of a sudden his body took to the idea of getting taller?

“Am I really?”

Enna flicked her hands in the direction of his bare ankles as if saying, *There’s your evidence.*

Razo nudged Enna out of the way and placed himself before her mirror. He had not seen his reflection in months or more. The top of his hair had been singed in the firefight and was not long enough to stand up impressively. His face sported several rather impressive bruises, and his skin was speckled red from the scalding water of Dasha’s fight with the burners. But something else was different—a firmer jaw? A longer chin? He squeezed his arm muscles and nodded, impressed at their girth, then glanced at Enna to see if she had noticed. She was smirking.

“Stand up.” He pressed his back to Enna’s and patted the tops of their heads. “I’m taller than you.”

“Barely. Don’t let it go to your head.”

“No, wait, let me say that again—I’m taller than you!”

“Barely,” Enna said again.

Razo did not care about *barely.* He strutted and frolicked, swaggered and sashayed, chanting his ha-ha’s and feeling the magnificence of his new size.

“You’re still a head shorter than Finn, *at least,*” she said.

“You can’t burst my pig bladder balloon, Lady Hair Ornaments. I know that I’m quite imposing.”

He changed back into his Tiran garments, and they sauntered down to the celebration, exchanging jabs, verbal and of the elbow kind, and were laughing to the point of the occasional snort when they crossed into the banquet hall’s heady fragrance of a thousand oil lamps. Finn was sitting on a pillow at their table, his back very straight, his thumb flicking a spoon as though to relieve nervous tension.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“Razo’s taller,” said Enna.

“That *is* funny,” said Finn.

Enna did not sit beside him.

The feast was more fancy than hearty—orange fish with heavy mustard sauce sweetened with dates, minced clam meat stuffed with peppercorns and pine kernels on bread soaked in wine. It was not until the chief of assembly’s speech during the pickled melon course that Razo realized what this was—a farewell gala.

“The honor of this royal visit . . .” *blah blah blah* “. . . excellent tidings from Lord Kilcad on the peace he greeted in Bayern . . . hope of ongoing relations . . . and bid a fond farewell to those Bayern who will now be returning home.”

Returning home. Razo had not thought . . . Of course, the assignment was meant to carry through only until after the assembly’s vote. Megina would stay, but he imagined many of Bayern’s Own would leave and others come to take their place. Razo would be sent back to Bayern’s capital, life as normal returned, no war, no worries. That would be all right. He supposed.

Home. It would slay him if he never saw his ma or Rin again, he loved being Uncle Razo, and there were some happy moments with his brothers, when he was not spitting dirt and pine needles out of his mouth; even so, the memory of the homestead pinched him like the clothes he’d outgrown.

He leaned on his elbow against a floor pillow, thinking how well he liked the lounge and lunch customs of Ingridan. And he was pretty attached to his lummas now and to the kind of weather that permitted sandals. Wind on the toes was a good thing. He even liked the summer with its breathless heat. The smell of tangerine blossoms so sweet and unreal, it felt wicked. The way the ocean gulped the city to a stop, the ships that made his toes itch to climb aboard. Eggy fig cakes and sour, sour olives, dark bread seeped in

greenish oil, fish and wine sauce unbearably sweet. Dasha. He would miss these things. A pressure in his chest told him that he already did.

Just as he was feeling his most sentimental, the music began. Four ladies with harps and fiddles settled into the center of the hall and played a melancholy tune, one he'd heard sung on every feast day. The sound of it went down his throat and twiddled with his stomach, and the words hummed themselves into his mouth.

> Ingridan, pour yourself inside my skin
> A city of seven rivers
> My blood runs in all your rivers

Dasha was one of the harpists. He watched her very closely and wondered if he'd already lost the opportunity to tell her that he liked her ankles, and that lock of hair that slipped loose from her braid, and when she was too happy to keep from bouncing.

When the song ended, everyone moaned as they applauded in the Tiran custom for giving homage to a song of their homeland. Razo was expecting another tune to follow, hopefully one a bit more robust to tap away the flavor of homesickness, but all the musicians rose and left, except Dasha. She held out her harp, and wonder of wonders, Finn stood, crossed the room, and took it from her.

Razo looked at Enna. Her face was so obvious and gaping, he decided she could never tease him about that again.

Dasha gave Finn her seat, made sure his fingers were on certain strings, then stepped back.

The room was shivering in stillness, everyone watching the Bayern soldier with a Tiran harp, his sword hilt clanking against its bow. His entire face was red-turning-purple, but his lips were straight and serious.

"I want to play a song for my love, Enna," he said.

Razo heard Enna emit a tiny sound, much like a squeak.

Either Finn's fingers missed half the right notes or the tune was as near to the sound of a wounded cat as Razo had ever heard. After what he could only guess was an introduction, Finn sang. Enna squeaked again.

> Tell her that she is my rose
> Tell her that I love her

Whisper that I've gone away
And I'll love no other

Finn was fairly large, decently broad, certainly strong, but as he sang, his voice sounded ten years old. It squealed over high notes and trembled and sometimes rasped and disappeared completely when the song sank too low. To Razo's mind, the song did not suffer much by losing a few of those absurd lyrics, but Finn sang them with bone-deep earnestness.

Razo's throat tickled as he tried not to laugh.

Finn's voice faded out, his thick fingers plucked the final notes, up the harp to the thinnest, shortest string and its piercing adieu. He placed the harp on the ground, his hands trembling as they never did when holding a sword. The silence of the room begged, *Should we applaud?*

Razo looked at Enna, ready to share a smile, and gulped when he saw her face. She was sobbing.

"Great crows," he whispered. There were more mysteries in this world than he could ever solve.

She teetered to her feet and ran sloppily across the room, around tables, leaping over outstretched legs. Finn had his arms out, and they embraced right there in the middle of the hall.

"Of course I'll marry you," Enna said. "Yes, Finn, yes, of course."

The silence shattered into walloping applause.

Razo clapped so violently that his hands hurt, and he still felt like laughing, so he did, though he was not laughing at Finn—the laugh was just stuck in his throat like a hard bite of apple, and he needed to get it out. Strangely, it made his eyes water.

Dasha was clapping hard, too, and the Bayern were whooping. Isi and Geric both cupped their hands around their mouths and shouted huzzahs. The prince gestured toward Finn and Enna in case Napralina had missed it, and she nodded happily. Talone, who'd been standing by the door, crossed the room and sat on a pillow beside Megina. She smiled without turning her head.

The thought occurred to Razo that if he had not been applauding close friends in a raucous room, he would have felt very lonely just then. He clapped harder.

When the banquet dwindled and the guests had drifted away, Razo still sat on his cushions, stacking bread crumbs into a miniature fortress. A hand touched the back of his neck.

"You're still here," she said.

He could smell a faint cloud of tangerine perfume and, underneath it, the heartier fragrance of ocean brine. The scent played him, and he felt full of the hum of her tune.

"Want to go for a walk?" His voice sounded just the right kind of casual, even if he could not quite school his face into a nonchalant expression.

The Ingridan autumn air was pleasant and cool and carried with it a round feeling like something complete—a full moon, a full plate, the end of a good day. The wind from the west smelled brown and parted the ocean from the air, filling it with harvest wheat.

They followed the Pallo, the slim river of Thousand Years, out the gates and across the avenue to where city architects had joined it with the tiled ways of the Tumult. The river was high, just one pace down from the edge of the bank. Razo watched their reflections drizzle across its surface as he told her of Enna's offer to teach her fire. Dasha stared straight ahead, her mouth agape.

"That is . . . that's just . . ." She ended in a whisper. "Thank you."

Razo thought about taking her hand and then did not. Dangling just above the horizon, the moon looked so perfect and round, he longed to pluck it from the sky and pop it in his mouth.

"I have not seen you much lately." She was wearing tiny silver bells in her hair. They tinkled when she turned her head, as though laughing at the water sounds rushing beside their feet.

"I haven't seen *you,*" he said.

His tone straightened her spine. "Well, where have you been? With the girls from the pastry kitchen?"

"With . . . what? What would you mind if I were?"

"I think it's disgusting the way some boys cavort with poor girls."

"You do?" Razo had not thought she could be so haughty.

"Yes. I've seen it a thousand times, noble boys like you playing with their hearts with no intention of making true on promises, just because they're beneath your rank and—"

Razo laughed. "Oh, you're worried about *them.* . . . Wait, ho there now, would it make a difference if you knew that I'm no noble?"

“You’re not?” She kept walking.

“No. Razo of the Forest, as poor as a tree rat in the winter.” He tried to read her reaction to the news from the corner of his eyes while whistling a jangled tune, then stopped when his dry mouth turned the whistle into a scratch. “So, does that make it all right if I cavort with pastry girls?”

“I suppose.” She sounded reluctant.

Razo’s own spine straightened. “What’s with pointing fingers at me anyhow, noble girl? What about you and Finn?”

“Finn? He wanted my help to learn the harp so he could play it for Enna and he asked me to keep the secret.”

“Oh, right. And the prince?”

“If you are referring to his intentions toward me, my father wrote me to ask my opinion, and I said I declined. By the way, did you see how smitten he seemed by the queen’s sister?”

“Yes, actually. Well . . . well, what of Victar? You said you didn’t know him and then—”

“I made a point to know all the men in Captain Ledel’s company after you told me your suspicions. We have become friends, of a sort, but he is just that type I was referring to, a cavorter and a heartbreaker. He makes me laugh, but I don’t like him much.”

“No, no, no, you do too like him. I saw you with Victar, you with your smile and your nose all crinkly.”

She stopped short. “My nose what?”

“All crinkly. Your nose crinkles when you smile especially big, when you’re really pleased.” He accused her with his glare. Then, of all inexplicable things, her eyes began to tear. “Uh, did I say something . . . ?”He rubbed his neck. “I’m always saying something . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You noticed my nose,” she said with a little squeak.

Razo had nothing to say to that.

“No one has ever observed that about me before, or never told me. It means you’re noticing me. It means you care.”

“Well, of course I care, any dolt could see—”

“Do you really?” She placed both hands on his chest and looked up.

It was about the best invitation he’d ever had to kiss a girl, and he was not about to let the moment escape. But this was no teasing girl who patted his bum just to see him squirm. This was someone who made his heart

clatter against his ribs. He did not feel quite as cavalier as he would have liked. His mouth was dry, his lips were dry, his head felt light, and he suddenly had the crazy notion that Dasha's hands were holding him down from the sky. He thought he had better say something quick, and the first words that touched his tongue were, "My heart's really pounding."

"I know," she said. "I can feel it."

"Oh," he said.

Quit stalling, he told himself.

So he bowed his head and closed his eyes, and somehow his lips found hers. He kissed her once, then let her lips go, but it was about the sweetest thing he had ever tasted, better than fig-and-egg cake, so he went back. A longer kiss. He peeked. Her eyes were still closed. He kissed her again and felt her mouth smile under his.

"You were stalling," she whispered.

"I was not."

"You were, too. You were scared."

"I'm not the least bit scared, my lady, see?" He swept an arm under her knees and picked her up, kissing her again as he did. "Not scared a whit."

Razo took one step off the pier and plunged them both into the autumn water. He bobbed back up like a duck after a feeding, lay on his back, and let her float him, the water under his body as strong as a net, massaging his back with thin, rippling currents.

His shoulder rubbed against a small boat, and he grabbed the side and clambered in, pulling Dasha in after him. He reasoned that as it was not being used, no one could mind if he borrowed it for a little row. The exercise warmed his muscles. Dasha looked extremely pleasing just then, as wet as an otter, but then the water rolled off her unnaturally fast, down her legs and onto the boat's floor, leaving her clothes wrinkled and dry.

She drew something out of the linen pouch she carried at her side.

"A sling!" he said.

"Two slings, even." She held the oars while he examined each, admired the weaving, the coarse green material.

"These are more durable in this humid climate, and I've heard that hemp slings might even be more accurate than wool ones. Though I don't know how it would be possible to improve your aim."

He bound the slings around his waist and took up the oars again, eager to be doing something besides staring at Dasha with an undoubtedly gushy

expression. She let her fingers drag in the water, and he wondered what the river's dreamy voice was telling her.

"Will you be going home now?" she asked.

"If that's where my captain orders me." He could not say those words and look at her at the same time.

"Do you miss it?"

"Bayern? Sure I do. And the Forest, and my ma and sister, too, though . . . I don't know, whenever I go to my ma's house, I feel like a stinky little boy again caught stealing a lick of honey." He laughed, wishing he had not used the word *stinky.* "I mean, nothing changes there."

She was quiet for a time, her fingers tracing ripples on the river. "My father's tenure as ambassador to Bayern will be short. He desires to return to Ingridan and the assembly."

"Hmm, I wonder who'll replace him."

They met eyes, smiling, both daring the other one to speak the idea. Razo gave in first.

"You've thought of bidding for the position yourself?"

Dasha batted her eyelashes in mock diffidence. "I would need a personal guard, of course."

"It'd be best if your guard was a fellow who knows Bayern pretty well."

"We could spend summer and autumn in Bayern, winter and spring in Tira."

"Home in time for the tangerine blossoms," said Razo.

"Home?"

He had meant Tira. He smiled again. She sat facing him, her hand on his knee, her eyes holding his gaze. He felt no need to look away.

"Razo, don't worry that you are not of a noble family."

"I wasn't. Unless you were."

"It might be a concern for my father, but he may assume, as I did, that you were chosen for the ambassador's party because of your status in Bayern." She paused. "Will it be a problem in your country? Would a marr . . . uh, you know, a close relationship between such persons as, say, you and me, would it be forbidden?"

Razo had to smile at Dasha, suddenly turned shy.

"I don't think so. At least, our king, Geric, he married my friend Isi, who was just an animal worker like me."

Dasha grinned in delight. "Your king married a commoner?"

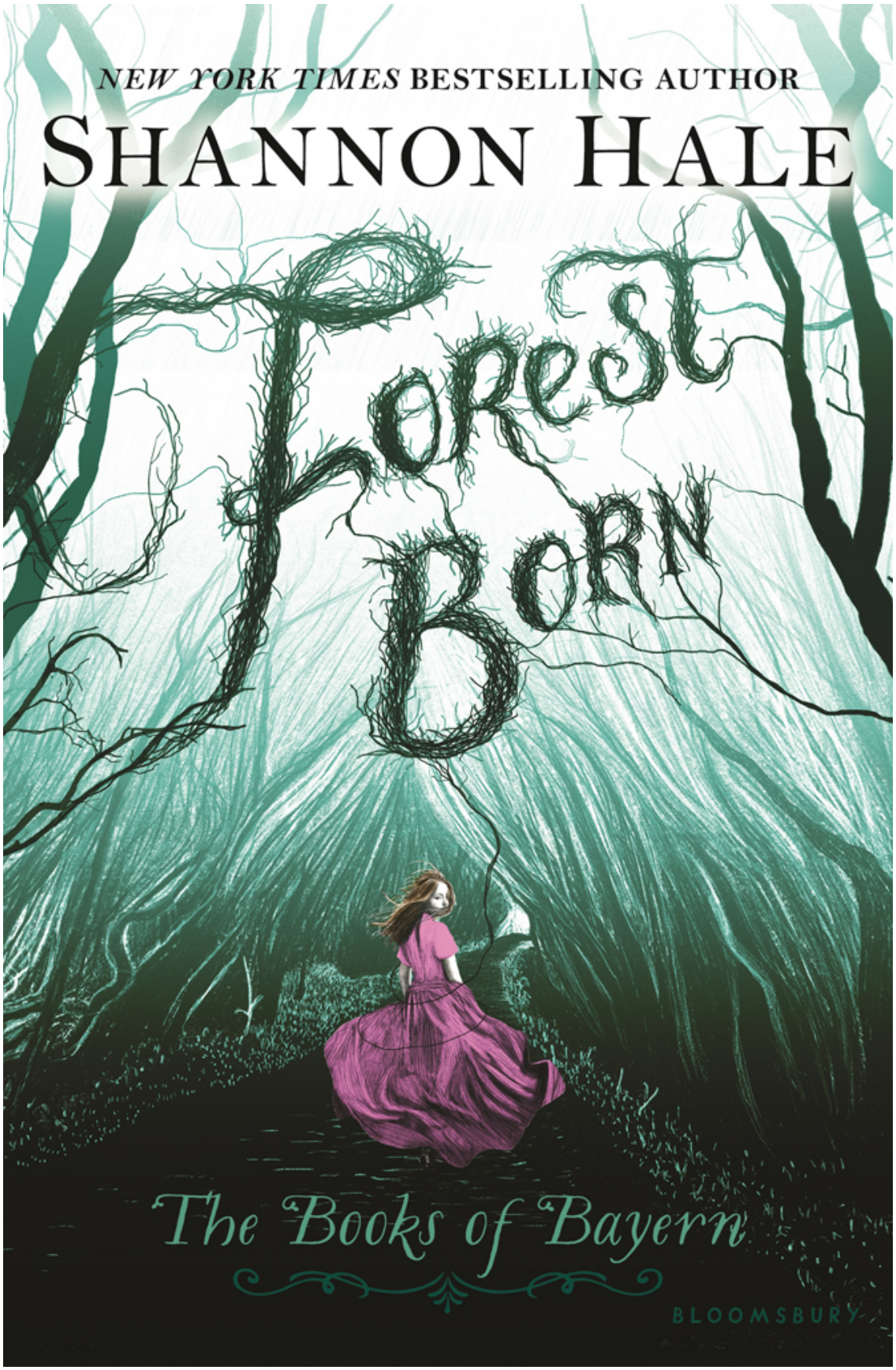
“Well, I guess Isi was in fact a princess of Kildenree, but when I knew her she wasn’t a princess at all, not until after . . . Well, it’s a good, long story.”

“Keep rowing, Lord Razo,” said Dasha. “I’m eager to hear about the princess who wasn’t a princess and how she met Razo of the Forest.”

So he began the tale, how he’d left the Forest to work as a sheep keeper in the city, and in his second year there, he met the new goose girl, a quiet girl who always hid her hair.

Razo dug the oars deeper and drew them back. The pull felt good, and he thought he could keep rowing forever, perhaps even to the ocean. The water was smooth under them, Dasha was listening with that forgotten smile her lips always kept at the ready. She edged closer so she could place both her hands on his knees, her face open to him. Razo’s heart stirred. He wanted to touch her again, but she wanted him to keep talking.

And that was all right for now. Telling his story felt like the next closest thing to giving her a kiss.


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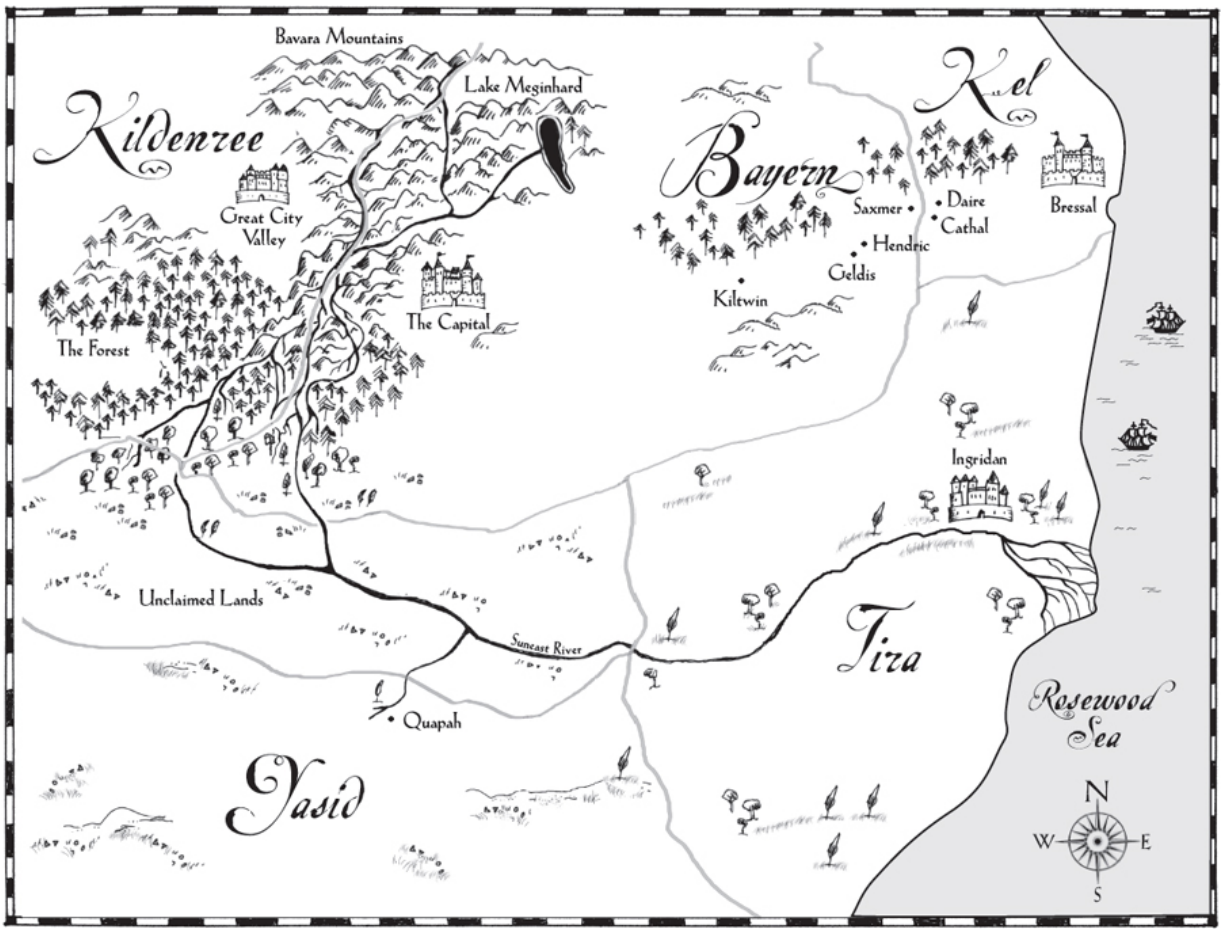
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who has heart-speaking




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Part One



The City

Chapter 1

Ma had six sons. The eldest was big like his father, the middle boys were middling. By the time Razo was born, all the family's largeness must have been used up. The brothers called him runt and made him feel that word. He spent winter nights longing for a younger sibling, someone he could call runt, someone he could push and pinch.

Ma was longing too, but for a girl to share thoughts with, a daughter cut and sewn from her own soul.

When Razo was almost five, he and Ma both got their wish. The baby girl was born on a night so hot the wind panted and the summer moon blazed like the sun.

"Rinna," Ma named her.

"A girl," said the father.

"Rinna-girl," said Razo, peering over the side of the cot.

The baby blinked huge dark eyes and opened her mouth into a tiny circle. All desire to push and pinch hushed right out of Razo.

He bent closer to her ear and whispered, "I'm going to teach you to climb trees."

Ma did not allow her baby girl into any timber, though Razo, with a trembling kind of impatience, looked her over each day to gauge if she'd grown big enough. The dark-haired baby cried if Ma put her down, so Ma did not put her down. She did chores with her daughter strapped to her side.

One spring morning when Rinna was two, her father went hunting in the deep Forest. Three days later, Ma sent her older boys to look for him. They found his pack and some bear prints, a reminder not to wander far.

That night in the one-room house built of pine, the brothers stared stiff-eyed at the darkness, the unfamiliar sound of their mother's sobs spooking them into wakeful silence. No one moved, except Rinna.

"Ma," she said. "Ma sad."

She crawled off her mat at the foot of her parents' cot and lay down by Ma, fitting into the curve of her body.

"My peaceful girl," Ma whispered. "My tender Rin." She kissed the top of her daughter's head and sighed before falling asleep.

Rin sighed too. She slept with her nose touching her mother's shirt, her dreams laced with the scent of the juniper berries Ma loved to chew.

Rin learned to crawl on moss and walk on pine needles, and by the age of four she could climb a fir as easily as fall into bed. That was thanks to Razo, who never had worked up a reason to push his little sister. When Rin was not clinging to her ma, she was running after her brother. She talked some and laughed some, but mostly she watched—the faces of her brothers, the sway of the trees. She watched the world the way most people breathed air.

"That girl sees the bones inside birds," her ma would say. "That girl can see your soul."

It was early autumn, after Rin's seventh birthday, when Razo, who was almost twelve and old enough to earn real coin, announced he was going to the city. Rin had never insisted on much from her nearest brother—she'd never had need. But now she flushed with indignation. Why should he go someplace so distant and horrible that he could not take his sister along on his shoulders? She would ask him that, she would demand he stay. But she did not have the chance. Razo left during the soft side of day while Rin still slept. He did not say good-bye.

Four days had clomped by, pulling a knot of anger tighter in Rin's belly, when Ma left too, called off to help a neighbor birth a baby.

Rin stood by her ma's house, her arms dangling at her sides. Never had she been without both Ma and Razo, and she felt like a fledgling perched on the rim of its nest. She stared first into the deep Forest, then back toward the city where Razo had gone—both directions frightened her.

Her niece Nordra was sitting on a log, her long black hair tied at the back of her neck. She was eight, one of several nieces and nephews who were older than their young aunt. Nordra hummed a tune, and Rin's heart cringed. Why was she just fine there, playing alone with no Ma or Razo, and why couldn't Rin be fine too? It was not fair. Rin hated how she felt, weak and forgotten and so scared. Her blood flashed hot in her face and drums beat at the insides of her ears.

"I want that," Rin said, pointing to the stick Nordra was using to twist holes into the dirt.

Nordra shook her head. "I'm using it. Go get another."

Rin's cheeks blazed. With Ma and Razo, Rin rarely had to ask for anything. She looked hard at Nordra, her thoughts skipping toward an idea of what she could say to make her niece relent.

“If you don’t give me that stick, I’ll tell Ma you took it from me, and she always believes me.” Rin could see Nordra knew it was true. “She loves me best, and she’ll wallop you with her wooden spoon. So you better give me the stick.”

Nordra gave up the stick, though her chin trembled.

Rin felt amazing, big as her brother Brun and powerful as Ma. So she demanded the doeskin boots Nordra’s da had made, and the bright red cloth she used to hold her hair, and her doll of wrapped sticks. Nordra gave each thing over, crying pitifully all the while, and with each new treasure Rin felt bigger, stronger, better.

“Rin! Rinna-girl, what’re you doing to make Nordra cry?” Ma bustled through the clearing, her black hair shot with white frizzing free from her blue headscarf. She pulled Rin to her feet by the back of her tunic.

“I just asked her for the things and she gave them to me,” Rin said, though the doll and boots felt treacherous in her hands.

“Then stop asking for things that aren’t yours. You just shut that mouth and keep it shut unless you have something nice to say. I’d never guessed you had such a bad core to you! I’m ashamed of my own daughter, making little Nordra cry. I’m right ashamed.”

Rin had seen Ma’s face red with anger before, but never when she was looking at her daughter. Rin’s bones shook. She wanted to flee from her body and claw her way into the sky to hide in the clouds where no one ever went. But Ma’s stare pinned her like a bug under the point of a twig. At Ma’s order, Rin gave everything back and apologized.

Ma looked at Rin once more, shook her head, and walked away.

That was when Rin ran. She ran because she hurt as if red coals glowed inside her chest. She ran until the trees swallowed the sight of her mother’s house. Always before when there was pain or sadness, Ma hugged or hummed it out of her—but this time Ma had walked away.

Rin stopped in a mess of unfamiliar trees, turning around, hurting so much, shaking and confused and not knowing where to go. She was bad. Her ma thought so. Home was lost somewhere in the trees, Razo was gone, Ma had turned her back. The coals in her chest blazed, the pain fierce and white hot. Desperate, Rin stumbled into a fir tree and hugged it as she would have hugged Ma.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I’m bad. I’m sorry.”

She listened, wishing with a childish hope that her mother's voice would find her there in the Forest and say it was all right, that she was not really bad, that she was forgiven and should come home. She listened harder, trembling with a desire to hear. A space inside her opened.

No mother's voice. But something else.

Not a sound, not a smell, not even a feeling. If it had been a color, it might have been green. If it had touched her ears, it might have sounded rhythmic, like the creak of a rocking chair or drone of a bee. If it had a scent, it might have been sweet and drowsy, like fresh pine on the fire.

The place in her chest that had ached with panic now felt warbley and sweet, drowsy and green. Her heart cooled, her breathing slowed, her jumbled thoughts sorted themselves. Calmed now, she understood that Ma would not be angry forever. And Rin worked out her own fault: telling Nordra what to do, demanding what was not hers. It was true what she'd told Nordra—Ma did love her best. But she'd spoken those words not because they were true, but because it would hurt Nordra. And Ma's love was sure to change if Rin stayed that insistent girl who took Nordra's stick.

In the future, she would not demand anything; she would keep the harsh words inside. She felt sure she could do this, a peaceful confidence shushing the tremble from her limbs.

And suddenly she knew which way was home, as if the trees themselves had pointed the way.

Ma scowled at Rin over supper, but that night she made room on the cot. Ma's warmth stilled her fears, and Rin found she could sleep. But that night she had a dream that would stick to her in years to come—a huge worm curled inside her middle, and when Rin opened her mouth, dozens of tiny worms crawled free, dripping from her lips, covering Razo and Ma and her entire family in wriggling slime.

The next morning, the dream clutching at her head, Rin crawled out of her shared cot and tripped away from the house to the nearest grouping of aspens. Her cheek against the papery bark, her small hands gripping the slender trunks, she closed her eyes and listened again for that calming green. It was not really *listening*, not with her ears, but she did not know how to explain it to herself. Peace sluiced through her, and again she made the promise to keep in the hard words, to demand nothing, to be her ma's peaceful Rin.

She returned to Ma working over the morning stew, unsure how to act or what to say. It had been so easy to hurt Nordra and almost lose Ma's love. What if she did that again?

Ma is good, Rin thought. *Ma knows what to do.*

Rin had always watched her mother, so it was not hard to try to be like her. She felt her body take on Ma's sturdy stance, her hands ready to work, her eyes watchful for who needed a hand.

"I can finish the bread," Rin said, working the dough Ma left on the table.

"There's my girl."

When Razo visited from the city a few months later, Rin trembled anew. She had not been Rin-with-Razo for so long that she could not remember what that girl did and how to keep that girl from being bad.

Razo's good, like Ma, she thought. So she mimicked him, finding herself more talkative, eager to explore and wonder, always moving, always near to grinning. He did not seem to notice any change in her—rather, he seemed delighted. But when they were with the rest of family, she felt overwhelmed by all the voices and ways of being, and curled up quiet.

Trying to be like Razo or Ma helped some, but that unpleasant agitation only released her when she was alone listening to the trees. She never thought to ask Razo if he too made a habit of relaxing against a tree's bark and drawing in its calm. When the disquiet began to roar, it just felt natural to turn to the trees.

Soon the trees affected not only her mood but her understanding. Each year a trunk put on a new ring of growth, and within those rings she found the tree's own story. She listened to the scent of it, the feel, the sound, and her mind gave it words—*soil, water, sap, light . . . and before, night and rain, dry and sun, wind and night . . . the drowsy stillness of leaves in a rainfall, the sparkling eagerness of leaves in the sun, and always the pulling up of the branches, the tugging down of the roots, the forever growing in two directions, joining sky and soil, and a center to keep it strong . . .*

There were times when the trees' lives felt more real than her own.

Razo left again for the city, and Rin felt his distance every day. Ma seemed farther off too, since Rin no longer fit on her lap. Ma's family kept growing, with five sons married, and Rin stayed busy. She was the most helpful girl, the children's best caretaker, and Ma's shadow. Her mother discovered Rin had a talent for reading the lie in a person's face and called her any time one of the young ones made questionable claims.

When Rin was thirteen, her brother Deet's wife died birthing their first child. Deet had no end of family to comfort him, but he sought out Rin. For weeks they took slow walks or sat peeling roots together, Deet talking, Rin listening. She never said much, but in a couple of months he began to smile, and the following year he married again.

And Rin kept on listening, never asking, never demanding. Until Wilem.

Wilem had only one brother, who preferred sleeping to anything else. But Wilem liked to dirt wrestle with the Agget-kin, as Ma's children and grandchildren were known, and so made the twenty-minute walk to visit several times a week. Once he wrestled Rin when she would not say no to a challenge, and after, victorious though sweating hard, he said, "Sisters might not be so bad if they're like Rin." His teeth showed their points when he smiled, reminding Rin of a fox.

The idea of Wilem entered her like a pleasant sliver she did not want to pluck. She considered him quietly until the day she spotted him climbing a tree alone. She shirked the wash duty to follow and pretended surprise at finding him up there, but stayed, and they threw pine cones at the nephews and laughed into their elbows. She felt a peculiar freedom in the top of that tree, hiding from work and becoming giddy from the scent of his skin. They were straddled between two branches, forced to lean together. The spring breezes were still salted with the chill of winter, and Wilem's warmth felt wonderful. She was fifteen years old, but it was the first time she'd been alone with a boy outside her family.

"You're wild, Rin," he said.

No one had called her wild before. She was Ma's shadow. But she wanted to be wild now, for him. Wild seemed more enticing than a bowl of berries.

She relished how she felt when she was imitating his careless, confident manner, falling into his quick pattern of speech, jumping from silence to silliness. He seemed to enjoy living. Wilem was someone she could stay with for a long time and not grow weary.

Ever since she'd made Nordra cry, words of appeal or demand were thick wool in her mouth. But she was intoxicated by wild, she was tipsy with living that brief life as a new Rin. So when Wilem climbed down the tree to go find her nephews, she felt as if her last chance to be wild Rin, to be desirable Rin, would run away with him.

She asked him to stay. She dared him to kiss her. She felt his warm, trembling lips against hers, and she wanted more, felt the want like a grumble in her belly, a sharpness in her chest. He was not going to kiss her again, so she spoke, saying anything she could think of to keep him close. And he did stay, for a while. They held each other awkwardly there under the tall pine while she talked to him and he clung to her. He kissed her again when she asked, and though his lips were soft and her middle thrilled, she could feel he did not mean the kiss.

They were not laughing anymore. The thrill cooled, and Rin was exhausted from trying to keep him. It was late when he left for home, his head bowed and shoulders stooped, and she was certain he'd never kiss her again.

The next morning she felt wrong, as if day had dawned only partly made, as if Wilem had taken half of her away with the kiss. She touched her lips. What had she said? She shuddered, an ache and a twisted stomach suggesting she had said too much. Something was wrong. She'd spied her older nieces sharing kisses with neighbor boys, and the next day they were full of sly smiles and giggles, not aches and shudders.

Coals burned inside Rin, hotter and hotter, while she dressed and helped Ma with the morning chores. She did not understand why she burned, but she wanted to cry from the pain.

As soon as she could get away, she ran, falling into the arms of a fir tree.

Take it away, she demanded silently. *Take what ever's wrong, cure me, make it right.*

She tried to throw herself into the soothing thoughts of the tree and seize its peace, but she could not forget Wilem. What had she said? She did not want to remember. The harder she worked to shut that out, the more twisted and dark her feelings became. Had she simply outgrown her connection to trees? Or was it possible the trees were shunning her for what she'd done? After making Nordra cry, her mother had thought Rin was bad and turned her back. After kissing Wilem, it seemed the trees did the same.

Rin ran to another tree, leaned against it to listen, and was accosted by a dizzying darkness. She fled to the aspens, and in place of green calm she felt clutched at and pulled down. She sat on the forest floor with her arms over her head, too lost and confused to cry. If the voice of the Forest was simply silent, then she should feel nothing at all, not this loathing—as if all

the trees spat hate and disgust at her. Her stomach turned, her head felt hot, her arms were too weak to lift. She wished she could die.

When evening came and she still had not died, Rin stood up, brushed off her skirt, and went home. It would not be too hard to hide her misery. Lately, no one took much notice of Ma's shadow.

Chapter 2

Spring gusted into summer, and every day Rin ran. She ran over pine needles that snapped and moss that hushed. She zigzagged and changed paths, bolted through sunny clearings and back into cool shade. She sweated to exhale the tightness in her chest, to hide from a world that felt crowded, hostile, and too dense to breathe.

The exertion helped some, but today guilt cut her run short—Ma had need of her, and her brothers and their wives too. She took one look toward the deep Forest, longing to test its promise that she might lose herself entirely in its echoing silence. Someday perhaps. But now she veered toward home.

When she reached the clearing of the homestead, she rested her hands on her knees, waiting for her breathing to slow. There stood her ma's house, one room built of wood, shutters wide open in the summer afternoon, fir boughs on the roof turning brown. Dotting the small clearing were five other houses, built by her big brothers for their own families. Everywhere children wrestled and shrieked and chased. The whole place bustled, motion constant, the family like a huge beast with a thousand parts.

Rin spotted Ma, a sobbing grandchild on her hip and a long wooden spoon in her hand. Rin's mother was nearly as wide as she was tall and looked sturdy enough to face down a root-ripping storm.

"Brun, your Lila there is making a ruckus that'll scare the squirrels into winter," she shouted as she crossed the clearing, sounding loving even as she scolded. "See to her or I will. Gren, don't you knock over that pot I just filled if you want to live to supper! Jef, you sack of bones, get back to work. I didn't raise you to nap like an overfed piglet. Look at you children—what pretty needle-chains you made! Now don't go scratching each other's eyeballs. Tabi, let go of your brother! He's not a branch to swing from."

Rin followed Ma through the clearing and to the fire pit on the far side of the little house. When Ma began to stir the pot hanging over the fire, Rin took the spoon from her hand.

"Rin, there's my girl, only sensible person for leagues. Keep the stew from burning while I patch up Yuli's knee, will you? I can't think what

those children meant by . . . now wait just a minute." Ma peered at Rin's face. "What's wrong?"

Rin tried to smile. "Nothing, Ma."

Ma sat Yuli on a bench, his sobbing more habitual than urgent, and put a hand under Rin's jaw. "You sure? You've been quiet lately . . . but it's not so much the quiet as something inside the quiet."

Rin shrugged, though her insides were turning to ice. Had Ma noticed these last months how often Rin ran off? Could Ma see that she was shaking inside? Would she speak the words, would she pronounce the problem and then make it right?

Ma felt her forehead, her cheeks, made her stick out her tongue, prodded her belly, listened to her elbows for creaks, pulled down her earflaps to look for rash. "Seem fine. You not feeling fine?"

Rin shrugged again. She'd never bothered anyone about the spiny things in her heart. It did not seem right to complain, especially not to Ma, who worked from the moment her eyes opened until she groaned as she lay down at night. Maybe everyone felt knotted like that but it just was not something spoken aloud. Or maybe only Rin was all wrong. If so, she'd never speak it, especially not to Ma.

"Could you . . ." Rin stopped.

"Ask me, Rinna." Her mother rarely told her what to do. Rin was the child who never needed scolding, who heard what her mother wanted before she'd even finished speaking. But Ma commanded her now, with fists on hips and eyes almost angry, daring her daughter to stay quiet. "Ask me."

And so Rin was surprised into saying exactly what she was thinking. "Could you hug me?"

Without hesitation, Ma pulled her in close, hugged her as if she were a tiny baby scared to be in the open world. Rin's head pressed into her mother's warm shoulder, and she breathed in wood smoke and juniper.

"My girl," Ma mumbled against her daughter's head. "My treasure. My perfect girl. How I love you and love you."

Rin wished she were six and could fit on her mother's lap, and every bad feeling or big scary terror could be drowned out by that ferocious love. There inside her arms, Rin's ache soothed a bit, but the snarled unease did not untangle. Rin had not believed one embrace could fix what was wrong, but she'd hoped enough to try.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

Ma hugged her firmer still and smattered her head with kisses before letting go and returning to Yuli, whose cry had become offended.

“Anytime you want a hug, my treasure, you just blink,” Ma said over her shoulder as she wiped Yuli’s knee with a wet cloth and gave him a heel of bread to chew. “Can’t think what’s the matter with me if my little girl has to ask for love.”

“I’m all right,” Rin said, eager to hide it again. “Maybe I’m just feeling lonely for Razo.”

“Yes, I bet that’s it. That’ll be it.”

Rin scraped the bottom of the pot to keep the stew from burning and tried to lose her worries by concentrating on the sounds around her—Yuli’s shaky breaths, Ma’s comforting mumbles, someone chopping wood, hollers from the children’s game of owl and mouse. And the constant murmuring of the trees—wind in the high branches, pine needles clicking together, the soft knocks of cones, the creak of wood. But she could not shy away from the same thoughts grinding in her head: *hide yourself, try not to be who you are, you don’t belong in this good family, even the trees think you’re all wrong, you’ve got to go away, away.*

But where would she go?

In the yard everything quieted, then silence burst with hollers and calls of greeting. Could it be Wilem? He had not returned to the homestead since that night four months ago. Many times when she’d been running, Rin had almost turned toward his home. For what purpose? She did not understand why she’d felt so desperate for him to kiss her or why the trees now kept their peace to themselves. But surely nothing she could say would fix it.

Rin tiptoed around the side of the house. In her nervousness, her hands rose to cover her mouth.

A couple dozen members of her family gathered, her Ma squealing and administering hugs. In that sea of dark heads, Rin caught sight of orange. Her heart beat harder. There was only one person in all of Bayern with hair that color—Dasha, the ambassador from the country of Tira, and her brother Razo’s girl. That meant Razo was here too.

Rin could hear Dasha saying, “It is a plea sure to return to the homestead again, Mistress Agget.”

The Tiran girl had taken to referring to Ma as Mistress Agget, a formality that actually made Ma blush. All the folk known as Agget-kin called her

Ma, including her grandchildren, who referred to their own mothers as "my ma" to avoid confusion. Even the nearest neighbors called her Ma. Only Dasha would stiffen things up like that. Apparently she was wealthy, her home in Tira a palace. "Isn't it wonderful how she's so comfortable here too?" Rin's family often said. But early last spring when Dasha had first arrived at the homestead, Rin had detected shock in Dasha's expression, even a little disdain. So why had Dasha stayed with Razo? That was what Rin wanted to know.

At last she glimpsed her brother, just exiting his mother's embrace. Razo looked the same—he was the youngest and shortest of the brothers, his cropped dark hair sticking straight up. Just the sight of him made her want to giggle. He was her best friend. And she had been his best friend—until Dasha.

Rin smiled, straightened, and waited for Razo to look for her, because he always did. She was usually standing a ways back, and he would call her Rinna-girl and push everyone aside to hug her or wrestle her or challenge her to a race or just knock his forehead against hers and smile.

His glance was roving. Her stomach tingled in anticipation. Then their eyes met, and in that moment before he could speak, a shock split her as she realized, *I can't tell him either.*

All these months she'd been planning what she would say on his return. "Razo, how can you stand to be away from the trees in the city? Or don't you feel anything from them? I used to think with them, through them, and feel calm. But not anymore." If she said that much, she'd also have to explain. "But then I kissed Wilem, and the trees changed toward me. I must be really bad if even the trees want me gone, and maybe if Ma knew me inside instead of out, she wouldn't love her girl anymore." If she could explain, perhaps he could help her make sense of it and fix it.

Only now did she understand that she could not admit it, even to him. He would not know how to mend her or the trees, and she could not reveal her secret ugliness, not without the risk of losing his love. That comprehension knocked her as if she'd fallen back-first out of a tree.

Razo waved. "Rinna-girl!"

She put her hands over her face and cried.

Everything went quiet. She could hear one of the children whisper, "Is Rinna crying? Why's she crying?"

"Uh . . . ," said Razo. "Um, Rin? Did I—"

“What’s the matter with our girl?” her mother asked the general gathering. “Does anyone know?”

“Kif, did you and Len do something?” Ulan asked her oldest boys.

But for the slamming pain in her chest, Rin might have laughed. It was ridiculous, her family looking dumbfounded while she cried without reason or sense. She would have tried to shrug it off and pretend that she’d stepped on a sharp rock or something, but the sobs kept pulling out of her chest, stuck to each breath like pine sap on her fingers.

Dasha spoke in a casual voice. “Rin and I are dying to take a walk together. It’s been months! We should be back by supper.”

Dasha’s arm hooked Rin’s and she walked her away from the homestead, whispering directions. “Don’t trip, there’s a big rock on your left. Duck under this branch. Let me help you hop over this fern.” By the time Rin dried her face and looked around, they’d left her family far behind.

“Is this the way to that sunny clearing with the aspens?” asked Dasha. “The one we went to last time I was here?”

Rin just nodded. Dasha was such a happy, bouncy kind of person, and Rin did not have the energy to try and reflect her mood.

The clearing was much smaller than the homestead, but wide enough that daylight streamed through the canopy. Aspens sunned themselves, leaves turned up and quaking. It used to be Rin’s favorite place in all the Forest. The last time she had pressed her forehead to an aspen trunk here, instead of soaking in their green calm, she had jerked back from the heart-battering ugliness.

Dasha sat on a rock and sighed. “Now, shall we just sit or would you like me to blather?”

“Blather please.”

“With plea sure.”

An hour flowed by as Dasha recounted her first sea voyage that previous spring, traveling north from her home country of Tira to a port in the kingdom of Kel.

“Razo made friends with the whole crew, as you can imagine, and they had him climbing ropes and hoisting sails. He learned seafaring songs, a few he wouldn’t repeat.”

Dasha described Kel, the green slopes around the seaport, the charming hats the Kelish ladies wore, and meeting King Scandlan. “He was odd, really. Perhaps I expected all kings to be as warmhearted and gallant as

Bayern's King Geric, but Scandlan was distant. Razo noticed it too, though he did not find the king's behavior as odd as I did."

Rin could not resist adding, "Razo probably felt sympathy for the king, figuring he was plagued by an itch that he couldn't decently scratch in public."

Dasha laughed. "Razo *would* think that!"

She went on with the story of their horse back ride into Bayern, where Dasha had come to replace her father as ambassador from Tira. Rin stretched out on a bed of moss, her chin in her hands, thinking about faraway places and ignoring her ache. *Maybe Dasha is a good sort after all, just like everyone says.*

She imagined asking Dasha, *Does everyone secretly feel lost? Sort of shoved into a corner alone? Do you feel something different when you're close to trees? Did they ever turn away from you? Do trees care if you begged a boy to kiss you? Have you ever felt like your home wasn't home anymore? If you were me, where would you run?*

Soon the shadows were thick, crossing the clearing as if fleeing to the east. Dasha stared at the sky soaking up a darker blue.

"I could stay here all night," she said casually, without looking at Rin as if not to pressure her. "Or we can go back. What ever you like."

Rin squinted toward home. She was not eager to face her family, but the day was quickly exhaling into night. She sighed. "If we head back now, we'll get there before dark."

Be nice to her, Rin reminded herself as they walked home. *For Razo.* She tried.

"Thank you. Sometimes being around family is best, and sometimes it's not."

"Those are true words," Dasha said, her eyes on the path. "I love my father, but it is nice being in Bayern without him. He is not like your mother. He is rather . . . hard. But I imagine even with a large, loving family, sometimes it would be good to get away."

Dasha took Rin's hand, a sisterly gesture. Rin did not want to hold her hand—she wanted to banish her back to Tira and have her brother all to herself.

"There you are!" Razo jogged up, slightly out of breath. "Everything all right, Rinna-girl?"

“What? Oh, you mean earlier?” Dasha said before Rin would have to explain. “Oh yes, she’s fine, that was nothing.”

“Oh. All right. So, while you were gone, I challenged the brothers to a slinging contest. They’re still bandaging their egos.”

“You’re the best in the world.” Dasha kissed his cheek, and Razo shrugged to hide his gratified smile.

Rin watched him, aware more than ever how he had changed in the past couple of years. There was a confidence in him, as if he were always dressed in armor from helmet to shielded boots. She did not know what had caused the change—his adventures in Tira, or getting out from under the shadow of five older brothers. Or Dasha.

Razo was looking into the canopy, and he asked, “Is it going to rain to night?”

Dasha turned her face up, considering. “No, not to night.”

“Excellent. We can sleep out.”

Rin wondered why Razo would ask Dasha that, and why Dasha would know the answer, but she was not in the habit of asking many questions.

That night at the homestead, all six houses emptied their inhabitants onto the forest floor. Rin, Razo, and Dasha lay their bedrolls on a patch of moss between two fir trees and stayed up with the moon, whispering stories and laughing into their pillows. On his previous visit, Razo had told his sister all about his year in Tira, but Rin wanted to hear it again. She enjoyed her brother’s attempts to keep his expression unaffected while he described how he’d bested two companies of soldiers at a slinging competition or discovered who had been plotting to restart the war between Tira and Bayern.

As Dasha watched him, her smile grew so ardent her nose wrinkled. She would reach over to touch his arm when she thought he deserved some comfort; she would giggle when he said anything the least bit amusing. And when Razo looked back, he seemed ten years older. This orange-haired girl from Tira was altering Rin’s favorite brother, spoiling him for other company, the way a night left out on the table changed yesterday’s dinner.

Razo did not seem aware of anything but Dasha until he asked, “Rinna-girl, are you really all right?”

She shrugged, then sighed, then buried her face in her arms. She felt stripped and beaten and completely out of lies. “I don’t know.”

“What’s going on?”

She shook her head. “You’ll think I’m odd.”

“Too late.”

“Ha.” But she was too afraid and confused to try and speak the whole truth, so she said, “I don’t feel right here anymore. I’ve been . . .” No, she would not admit how often she’d run toward the deep Forest and yearned to keep going. She’d seen the hollow sorrow that still lay on Razo’s face whenever he remembered their father. “Sometimes I want to just . . . go away.”

Dasha clapped her hands together. “Of course! You will return to the city with me and Razo.”

“What? No. I . . . I can’t go to the city. What would I do in the city?”

Rin had never been to Bayern’s capital, not even for market day with her brothers. She imagined it as an enormous beast crouched behind a wall, and when she walked through the gate, it would catch her in its spiked teeth.

“You could get work in the palace, Rin, or be a waiting woman perhaps.”

Rin expressed her doubt with a snort, and Razo said, “Rin a waiting woman? That’s a laugh.”

Rin did not see Dasha elbow Razo in the gut, but she heard his grunt.

“Don’t you know who you are?” Dasha asked, her fists on her hips. “You are sister to Razo of Bayern’s Own, the most important group of soldiers in the kingdom. He also happens to be the chief personal guard to the Tiran ambassador.” Dasha inclined her head. “Not to mention that he’s dear friends with Bayern’s king and queen. Apparently it doesn’t occur to your brother that he has handy political connections and might use them, but politics is what I do. If you want to live in the city, in the palace, and be a waiting woman, then good gracious, girl, use your connections and do it.”

Rin blinked. “But . . .”

“You should definitely come,” Razo said. “It’ll be good fun, you’ll see.” And he launched into an exhaustive narrative of all the city’s charms, mostly involving apple cakes, sausage vendors, and palace banquets.

Soon the idea was firming inside her. Leave the Forest, go to the city. Keep moving. Like with swimming. Last summer some Agget-kin had dammed the stream and made a pool. They discovered pretty quickly that if they did not keep moving in the deep spots, they would sink. Whenever Rin was alone, the world still, nothing to do but think, she felt that sinking sensation in her middle, sure her head would go under and she would drown inside her own self.

Keep moving, she thought. The trees no longer relieved her, and running far and flirting with the deep Forest helped a little but cured nothing. She had to go farther, do something different.

When all three began to yawn more than talk, Rin settled onto her bedroll and closed her eyes. As soon as her thoughts were her own again, she felt that gray panic rush through her, gnawing her bones crooked.

I am going to the city, she thought hard at herself to bolster her spirits. *I'll go before my family notices anything's wrong. I'll get away from trees that loathe me. And I'll be all right.*

The idea of leaving the Forest felt like standing on the rim of a well and willing herself to fall in. But she could not stay home, not as she was, not with the piercing disquiet, the wrongness that clung to her like wailing children who never sleep. She needed to run farther. She needed to go out into the world that had changed Razo and ask it to change her too.

Somewhere a mouse squealed inside the talons of an owl. Somewhere a dry leaf cracked under an animal's step. Everywhere the trees sighed. It was a long time before Rin could fall asleep.

Chapter 3

When Razo and Dasha took leave of the family four days later, Rin stood beside them, wearing her good tunic and boots and dangling the small sack of her possessions over her feet.

Everyone was gathered before the main house—Ma, the five oldest brothers, their five wives, and the twenty-three children. They patted Razo's back, engaged in last-minute wrestling matches, and gave Dasha timid cheek kisses, since she was too foreign and fancy for common handshakes and slaps.

Then one of the little ones said, "Why's Rin got her pack too?"

Everyone went quiet. A bird called out from a tree, shrill and insistent. For only the second time in her life, Rin found herself the focus of her entire family. She kept her eyes on the shadow of her bag swishing over her boot.

Dasha cleared her throat. "Rin's coming with us. To the city. It might be nice for her to have a change of scenery. Work in the palace. That sort of thing."

No one spoke.

Dasha cleared her throat again. "I'm sure she will be back before long."

"Rin's going? You're going?" Rin recognized her brother Jef's voice, though she did not look up. "You're teasing, aren't you?"

"No," said Razo. "You just open your ears when we say, Rin's coming with us and don't make a fuss."

Her oldest nephew Meril said, "Don't believe half of Razo's stories about the city. It's not as nice as he makes it out."

"It's a dirty, smelly, crowded—," her brother Brun began.

"There are people who'll hurt you for no good reason," Brun's wife Sari interrupted. "They'll knock you down, they'll spit on you, not care a spoonful of mush about—"

"Ma needs you," said Ulan, Jef's wife. "And who'll help me with the little ones on wash day? Come now, this isn't like you to run off and leave us all—"

"Don't give her a hard time," said Razo. "She wants to come for a bit. No harm. So, bye now!"

Razo took a few steps as if hoping for a fast departure, but Rin could not make her legs move.

Coward, she thought. *You coward*.

Each time Rin had been about to tell her ma, her ma would look at her with eyes full of sweetness, and that expression that said Rin was her beloved girl, her most precious one. Rin could not bear breaking that. She felt fresh sympathy for eleven-year-old Razo sneaking away at dawn so he would not have to say good-bye to his baby sister.

"Rinna?" said Ma. "You're going to the city?"

Rin glanced up and then back at her boots as quickly as she could. Ma looked so confused, Rin's heart cracked. She was betraying her. But to stay and keep pretending that she belonged in the Forest, that would be a betrayal too.

"I am, Ma," she said. "Going for a bit."

One of the children started to cry, softly at first, but when her mother tried to hush her, the cry broke into a wail of despair that reached up through the canopy and seemed likely to pierce the sky and make it rain.

"What's happening?" another child whispered.

"Rin's leaving," someone whispered back. "She's going to the city forever."

"Forever? Rin's leaving forever?"

More crying voices joined the first, and the wail was so loud, no one could hear Rin mutter, "Not forever. I hope."

It was all Rin could do not to join in, let her voice rise up to the treetops and crack the sky. She nearly said, "Never mind. I'll stay and everything will be normal." Maybe it was for the best that she struggled to speak in crowds.

What good was she to her family broken? She could not keep pretending to be the same Rin, the never-fail Rin, the helpful Rin, not when she was about to break apart like burned-through wood. The trees had changed for some reason, and she was no longer welcome in the Forest.

So at last Rin shouldered her pack, met her mother's eyes, and said under the hubbub, "Bye, Ma."

Rin turned and walked away before she could cry. The protests silenced behind her. Razo and Dasha soon outpaced Rin, her steps slowing. She needed to shut herself in that moment. Hurting was the least she could do for the offense of leaving her Ma.

She glanced back once, and a few members of her family lifted their hands in halfhearted waves. Her mother had not moved, her hands still clasped together, her weight on one foot, her face nearly expressionless. But when she caught Rin's eyes she sprinted forward, and her blue headwrap slipped, setting free loads of kinky black and white hair. Rin waited, her heart squeezing painfully.

Ma seized Rin and squeezed her, pulling in her arms and her head, as if afraid the girl would fall apart. The whole world became Ma's warmth, her hands, the smell of juniper, the thud of her heart.

She released Rin to look her in the eyes, anxiously smoothing her daughter's dark hair away from her brow, straightening her tunic. "I never thought you'd leave. Of course you might, but I just never thought . . . Razo's always had half his mind elsewhere, so that boy coming and going feels as natural as the turning of the seasons. But not my Rinna-girl, not my baby girl." She took Rin's hands, rubbing them between her own. "You've not been yourself of late. And I know if you'd wanted me to know why, you would have talked to me about it long ago, so I don't ask. But I tell you this —go out there and find what ever's floated out of you and then come back to us right quick. Some folk is made for wandering and being in the open world, but you're a Forest girl, Rinna. I can't help thinking that the longer you're away from your family and your trees, the more you just might wither away. So come on back and be my sweet-eyed tender girl home in her Forest again. Right quick. You hear me?"

"I will, Ma. I'm sorry. I'm really—"

Rin shut up, her voice hooked to tears now. Her mother was right about the withering. She already felt dried-up and half-dead, and it hurt so much she actually looked to see if her limbs were splitting.

"I'll miss you every moment until then. My baby girl, my peaceful Rin. Go on and catch up with Razo, I won't keep you. Just you know I'll be hoping for you each day."

Rin nodded. She had not intended to run, but when she turned her back on her mother, her body wanted to collapse, and running seemed the only way to stay upright. Dasha glanced at her when she caught up with them, but she did not ask why Rin had been fleeing as if for her life. They walked in silence for a time. And Rin did not look back again.

It was good she was going. It was. Living with her family, letting them believe she was her ma's shadow, that was a lie, and the kind that would

build into a storm to blow her down. It *was* good that she was leaving, so why did she feel like a straw doll that had lost all its straw?

They traveled for two days, the hum and click of the Forest sweeping past Rin in a blur of green. Emerging from under the canopy to join a main road, Rin had to gasp at a sky that grew bigger and bigger till she thought it might swallow the whole world. Eventually she had to admit the sky was greater than the Forest, a thing she had never before imagined.

An escort waited at the city gates with two spare horses for Lady Dasha and her chief personal guard. Rin rode on her brother's horse, her arms seizing his chest in case the beast took a fancy to flinging them off. She did not trust horses. They were so large and they moved in unexpected ways. People were one thing—Rin enjoyed trying to guess a person's thoughts. But who knew what a horse was thinking? Rin looked into the huge round eye of the beast beside her and decided that she did not want to know. It most likely involved eating its rider, bones and all.

The city was everything that the Forest was not. A wall ten men high kept the trees out and the people in, boxing in the clanging and whirring and cracking and whacking. So much noise that Rin wondered how the people could stand it. She startled constantly, confused by the commotion, imagining she kept hearing someone call her name. Her heart was tired from stopping and starting, and she wanted to cover her ears and yell at everyone to just hush up.

Dasha said, "Soon it will all sound like wind in the leaves to you—just noise you find yourself ignoring."

"You don't notice the noise anymore?"

"Not so much."

Rin considered. "If there was a dog standing on your pillow barking in your face every night, do you think you'd eventually get used to that too?"

"I . . ." Dasha smiled. "I hope to never find out."

It seemed to take all day to ride up the curving streets, but at last they reached the topmost swell and faced what could only be the palace. It was as huge as the city-dwelling beast of Rin's nightmares.

"Oh no," she said aloud.

"Did you say something?" asked Dasha.

Rin did not care to admit, “I’m feeling fairly alarmed at the moment and I suspect if I go inside that thing, it’ll chew me up and spit me out,” so she said, “It’s big.”

Razo snorted. “That’s the truth. Just wait till you see inside—it’s full of *Rooms*.”

He dragged Rin through corridors and galleries, courtyards and antechambers, pointing out the absurdity of the palace finery with a tone that attempted derision but sounded proud. “Vases everywhere, as if all the tables weren’t enough. I mean, what’s the point of having all those little tables if you have to go and find vases to put on them, and then find something to put in the vases? Hundreds of vases, nearly a *thousand*. And you’ll know I’m not exaggerating if you count sometime. I have.”

His fervor made Rin smile, which was a distraction from her lingering dread. At least the palace had not actually turned into a monstrous beast and chewed her up. Yet.

Rin could not tell much difference between a stone wall and an inlaid wood wall, but she said “ooh” and “wow” so Razo could believe she was properly impressed. He greeted everyone by name—kitchen staff, chamber ministers, guards and courtiers and maids alike. Everyone hailed Razo in return, and no door seemed closed to him.

“My sister,” he’d explain in passing. “Here from the Forest. I’m showing her all the *Rooms*.”

And the sentry would nod and let him pass.

“You’re important here,” Rin told Razo, knowing that would make him puff up and gloat, but she could not resist.

“What do you mean *here*?” he said, but he was so delighted, he took her to the kitchen next. “Best place in the palace.” She soon agreed. The storeroom alone took her breath.

The rest of the day rushed past like a spring-fattened stream. They ate; they found Dasha, who had secured Rin a post as a waiting woman, what ever that meant; then Razo and Dasha bid her good night.

Another antechamber. This one full of beds and wardrobes and screens for undressing. This one was apparently her new home. It came with three waiting women who talked. And talked and talked. And sometimes expected a response.

So Rin tried to do as she’d always done, patterning her style of speech and attitude after another, trying to fit into their mood. But one girl talked

quickly, the other slowly, and one was quiet, then given to sudden bursts of energy. And they spoke of things foreign to Rin, other towns and families, castles and gowns, music and dancing. She did not know whom to imitate or what to say, and the dizziness of so many *Rooms* and the feeling of being buried inside a stone beast was overwhelming. Rin ended up shrugging a lot until she finally just lay down on her bed and shut her eyes.

She missed the breeze moving over her skin. She wished she might look up and see stars popping through a canopy of pines and feel nothing but the chill goodness of a night forest, the warmth of Ma at her side, the slumber breathing of her family all around.

Instead she heard whispers.

"Relative of someone important, I gather, or why else is she here?"

"Do you think she's dim-witted, how she hardly speaks?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Her Majesty's never had more than four waiting women. This one's unnecessary."

"It'll be nice to have an extra hand till Cilie comes back, though I could wish she wasn't yet another rough girl."

"How did Cilie secure her post? I never heard."

"She's from one of the east provinces—a poor girl. There was some sad story involved, and you know how the queen crumbles for the sad stories."

"I could wish Her Majesty had a little more backbone, to tell the truth."

"When does Cilie come back? Perhaps she knows the new girl."

"Oh, I doubt the new girl is from the east. If I had my guess, I'd say she's Forest born."

Chapter 4

Over the next few days, Rin saw little of Razo and Dasha, and had the extraordinarily odd experience of spending most of her days under a roof. Waiting women served the queen, but Rin only glimpsed Queen Anidori coming and going, while she had her fill of the other women.

They seemed competent, though they spent a tremendous amount of time talking before performing any duty, asking another's opinion how to do this or that, or ought they do this instead? And did anyone else catch a gander of that new chamber minister with the broad shoulders? And wouldn't another night of music in the grand chamber be just the thing?

Rin watched and listened, and found ways to be useful.

"Look at that spot! She'll never complain, but I know this is Her Majesty's favorite dress."

Rin took the dress back to the laundry-mistress.

"Tomorrow's the queen's riding day, and that stable-master hasn't replaced the left stirrup yet, I'll wager."

Rin went to the stables and watched the stablehands at work, and when no one noticed her, she fixed the stirrup herself.

"Where's that button? I swear I had it right here. Look at that, just about to sew on a new button and it up and walks away."

In Rin's vast experience as an aunt, no object ever walked away but it had help from a child. She slipped into the adjoining nursery, where the queen's son, Tusken, played with pale wooden blocks. He had a mass of wavy fair hair tumbling around his face, and cheeks so round and kissable they seemed like peaches ripe for plucking.

"Hello, Tusken," she whispered, kneeling beside the prince and kissing his cheeks a few times because she could not help it. He was nearly two years old but still wonderfully chubby, and her heart strained for her little ones back in the Forest.

She held up both of her hands. "How many hands do I have? Let's count. One, two. Now let's count yours."

He held up his hands and no button fell out, but he kept his mouth curiously shut.

"Good boy. Now let's count teeth."

She opened wide her mouth, and he did the same. Inside his cheek, something gleamed. She scooped it out with her finger.

"Oh dear, you could choke on that. Buttons aren't food, lamby. We only put food in our mouths."

She helped him stack his blocks and cheered when he knocked them down. Then she returned to the other ladies, placing the button on the table.

"Hello, there it is! Where'd you find it, Rin? Eww . . . why is it wet?"

Rin decided she'd keep a closer eye on Tusken.

Summer was lingering out of doors, the days long and sweet as if sucking on a honey stick. Rin watched it through a glass pane. She was continually flinging open windows, leaning out, smelling the air that tingled her nose with scents of flowers and horses. She longed to be the one to escort Tusken on his daily romps in the garden, but she was being especially cautious. *Don't ask for anything, make no demands, keep the hard words inside.*

Finally one of the others suggested it, a pale girl named Janissa who sported scratches and an angry welt across her cheek from chasing Tusken through shrubbery.

Although Rin had taken charge of a dozen children at a time, this one little boy felt as important as a hundred. She took Tusken's hand and led him past staring servants and observant sentries with an apprehension that made her squeeze her eyes shut.

It was a relief to be in the gardens, crawling through bushes, making "soup" in a castoff helmet with water, flowers, dirt, and leaves. The few trees were squat and ornamental, but where the gardens merged into the stable yard, a massive elm held court, looking as out of place as a roughly clad giant would in the palace's throne room.

Stablehands came and went, soldiers and pages, and no one slowed to touch the tree or even look up to admire its lush crown.

They must not need trees, she thought. *They must not feel any more from a tree than from dead wood.*

She'd wondered the same about her own family in the Forest, but now it seemed true. People would not be willing to live in a city if they needed trees as Rin did. As she had.

Rin accompanied Tusken outside all week, and on the seventh day at last she dared. She brought Tusken to the elm, where he sat in its twisted roots, breaking sticks into tiny pieces.

Rin stepped closer. *Maybe it's only the trees of home, maybe they're what's wrong and I'm all right . . .*

She pressed her cheek to the ropy bark and closed her eyes. Trembling, she opened herself inside, as if she were listening hard, though not with her ears.

Please, she thought, hoping for a trickle of that familiar peace to work inside her. *Please.*

She gasped and flung herself away, filled with a creeping nausea that pressed against her throat and made her forehead sweat.

Tusken hopped to her, and she pulled him close.

"It's not the trees," she whispered, though he would not understand. "It's me, Tusken. What can I do about that?"

"Tick," he said, waving a stick near her face. "Tick. See tick?"

"It is a beautiful stick."

Tusken nodded.

Rin did not sleep well that night. Early, before the waiting women awoke, Rin crept out into the dark blue morning and ran as if from death itself. The air tore out of her lungs, her feet hammered on the ground. There was no running away here, with a wall enclosing the gardens and stables, and sentries by the gates. No illusion that she could keep on going until she ceased to be. But at least while she moved, the piercing disquiet did not undo her.

Rin washed her face and arms in a bird bath and sneaked in just as the others began to stretch and awaken.

That afternoon, Cilie, the fifth waiting woman, returned from her visit home and declared she was nearly expiring from eagerness to have some time alone with Tusken.

"I'm happy to keep taking him out myself," Rin said.

Cilie sat before a mirror, redoing the complicated coil of her hair, which was long and brown and lush, the most striking feature of her otherwise plain appearance.

"Let her do it, Cilie," said Janissa. "He seems to like her. She's had more success than the rest of us."

"That won't last," said Cilie. Her eyes were small and a little close together, reminding Rin of a pig. "There's no pleasing the little prince, spoiled to the bones he is."

Rin very much wanted to say, “There’s something in you I don’t like. Not a bit. You have the look of a dog who’s eaten its master’s meal and is ready to bolt. And you have pig eyes. So don’t you complain about Tusken in my hearing.” But she stuffed the words inside and did not argue, taking Tusken by the hand without waiting for permission.

In the gardens that day, Rin and Tusken discovered fat snails, a rainwater-filled hollow teeming with water insects, and once, Cilie crouching behind a shrub.

Rin strode right up, her fist on her hip, a mannerism that was all Ma. Cilie startled and ran off. Some time later, she spotted Cilie by the stables, arguing with a man Rin did not know.

“Something there I don’t like . . . ,” Rin muttered.

The next day Cilie was waiting for Rin beyond the arch that led to the flower garden, a spot hidden both from the nearest sentries and the gardeners working beyond in the sun. She smoothed her glossy brown hair away from her forehead, making sure every hair was in place.

“It is my turn to watch Tusken. I love him and miss him desperately after so much time away.”

Cilie did want to be with Tusken, but not because she loved him. There was some other purpose in those pig eyes that Rin could not read. Rin tried to walk around her.

Cilie grabbed her arm. “You’re not clever enough to care for this boy. The queen doesn’t trust you. She wants me to take him from now on.”

Rin was afraid to speak with all the hot anger rising to her throat. She pulled her arm free, gripped Tusken’s hand, and started away, saying, “Well, Tusk, shall we hunt frogs today?”

Cilie darted in front of Rin and shoved her hard in the chest. Rin fell back, hitting the flagstones. Cilie tried to pick up Tusken, but he spun away in an oblivious dance. Rin scrambled to her feet, putting herself between Cilie and the boy. She held up her hands in fists and glared. Razo had taught her how to throw a punch. He’d let her practice on his flattened palms, and she’d laughed so hard she’d gotten the hiccups. But she had never actually hit anyone. Now, facing Cilie, her fists trembled with eagerness. Even more insistent were the words building inside her like a mouthful of stones.

“Leave him alone.” Rin was as startled by her words as Cilie seemed. Telling others what to do was her ma’s business. Shame burned in Rin’s cheeks, but she did not apologize or turn away.

Cilie took a step back. “How dare—”

“I see you.” The passion in her words made Rin feel warm and bright as the sun. “No one else does, but I do. I see you’re hiding something. And if you hurt Tusken, I’ll kill you.”

Cilie stumbled a few more steps back. Rin could see she believed the threat but still did not flee, her own intent greater than her fear. So what was Cilie’s intent? Could she truly mean Tusken harm?

Yes. Now that Rin looked, she could see that clearly in Cilie’s face. Secrets, dark designs, murderous thoughts, and desperation. And all of it focused on Tusken.

Rin’s anger washed away as quickly as it had flamed to life, replaced by clammy fear. She swooped at the boy, flinging him into her arms, and hurried into the garden. Footsteps slapped behind her, and Rin ran faster, casting her gaze around for safety.

“Finn!” she called to a large soldier with dark, longish hair, one of Razo’s closest friends and a fellow Forest born.

Finn left his group of soldiers, his eyes darting to Tusken’s face, then around for signs of an enemy. His steps quickened into a run. “What’s happened?”

Rin glanced back—Cilie was already gone. She took a breath and discovered she was trembling so hard she could no longer hold Tusken and handed him over to Finn. What had that woman been up to? Perhaps nothing serious, perhaps Rin had overreacted. But she still itched with fear.

And it was not just the altercation that set her feeling like a bag of chattering bones—it was speaking those words. She could feel them in her head still, rolling around, clanging into her thoughts. *Leave him alone. I’ll kill you.* In truth, Rin could not bear to finish off a pigeon she’d downed with her sling, but the threat had felt so real.

And she felt bad. Wrong. Sick with herself. Certain that if her ma had heard her speak those words, she would have turned her back. Rin had sworn to herself that she would never speak like that again, not as she had to Nordra all those years ago. Living in the city was dangerous—so many people, so many chances to slip up.

After a few moments in patient silence, Finn asked, “Do you want me to stay with you?”

Rin nodded, got on her knees and hugged Tusken, whispering to him of all the spectacular insects they were going to find today. Tusken patted the

top of her head and said, “Win,” finding the *w* sound in her name. Then, “Finn. Win, Finn, Win, Finn,” marching around to the beat of his rhyme.

Finn stayed by them all afternoon. She’d always felt a certain kinship with the large soldier, who wasted no words, and once her trembling subsided, she found it easy to reflect Finn’s quiet nature.

When they were ready to go in to dinner, Finn escorted them to the queen’s antechamber.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asked.

Rin shook her head. “No, I’ll be all right. Thanks, Finn. Thank you.”

Cilie was inside, whispering angrily with two of the waiting women. Rin overhead a few words: “. . . completely crazy . . . attacked me . . . Tusken shouldn’t . . .”

Rin passed them without a second glance, taking Tusken into the nursery.

She was teaching Tusken a song when the queen appeared in the doorway, tall and slender, her yellow hair braided and hanging in a simple loop.

“Mama!” Tusken yelled and waddled to her. She picked him up and swung him around.

“Hello, my most precious. Oh, it’s good to see you. I was so busy this week, but our visitors left today and now I’m all yours.”

“Mama busy.”

“That’s true, but no more. Were you playing with Rin?”

“Pway Win,” Tusken said, tugging on the blue stone necklace at his mother’s throat.

Rin closed the door between the nursery and the antechamber. In the four weeks since she’d come to the palace, she had never spoken to the queen, and it took a few moments to muster the courage. She kept her eyes on Tusken’s dangling bare feet so she would not lose her nerve.

“I don’t trust Cilie,” Rin said in a small, shaky voice.

There was a pause before the queen replied. “And you think I shouldn’t trust her either?”

Rin was still anxious from her words of demand that morning, quaking inside like aspen leaves in a windstorm. *Be careful*, she shouted at herself.

She took another breath. “I don’t trust Cilie with Tusken.”

The queen’s arms tightened around her son. “Do you know anything specific? Has she made threats or hurt him?”

“No, I don’t know anything. She’s . . . I’m sorry.” Rin almost turned and left then, sure she was behaving as no waiting woman should. But she remembered the look in Cilie’s close eyes and summoned more courage. “She was acting oddly, insisting she be with Tusken. And something in her . . . expression . . . made me not trust her.”

“Do you think she plans to hurt him?”

Rin shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know anything, but I feel afraid for him.”

The queen studied Rin’s face. “Thank you, Rin. I’ll take your warning very seriously. If you discover or even suspect anything else, please come to me.”

Rin believed her. Everything in this woman, every part of her face, every movement of her hands, spoke of truth. Rin watched the queen as she spoke to Tusken, instinctively positioning her own body in a similar attitude, feeling how much more confident she felt with her shoulders pressed down and back like that, how naturally her left arm hung at her side, how pleasant her lips felt in the attitude of almost smiling.

“Come on,” the queen said, placing Tusken on her other hip. “Your da will want to hear the new song you learned. Let’s go see if we can hunt him down.”

“Dada hiding?” asked Tusken.

“In a crowd of ministers, no doubt. We’ll save him. Thank you, Rin.”

“You’re welcome, Your Majesty,” Rin said, imitating the warm, low cadence of the queen’s voice. It felt nice.

The queen paused at the door. “I knew your brother before I was a queen. He was, and remains, a friend truer than sun in summer. I like that he calls me Isi. I know all the ‘your majesties’ people ply me with are out of respect for the crown and I should take my due. But when we’re alone, Rin, I’d like it if you’d call me Isi, too.”

Rin tried the words. “Thank you, Isi.”

Rin stared at Isi’s back as she left the room. A chill in her blood spoke of fright, though she was more curious, the kind of curious that thrilled and stung. While she’d been with Isi, the constant squeezing in her chest had eased some. For the first time in months, maybe years, she had not felt like a stranger.

That’s who I want to be, Rin thought. *If I had to be someone forever, I’d choose her. There’s something different. There’s something about our queen*

. . .

Not that she wanted to be queen of Bayern, she told herself. She just wanted to feel like that, to move through each moment as easily as a fish through clear water. She wanted to see good everywhere, as she imagined Isi did, to have confidence in her shoulders and truth in her face. She wanted not to be the girl who had to trick Wilem for a kiss, who fled toward the deep Forest, who ran from home.

She'd heard rumors that the queen was friends with the wind, though she did not understand what that meant. Razo had never said much about her, but perhaps Razo did not notice Isi the way Rin did because he had no need to. He was at home in forest or city, cottage or palace, Bayern or Tira. When he left the Forest, he'd been moving toward something good, not running away like Rin was.

For the next two weeks, Isi made certain there were two soldiers flanking Rin and Tusken on their bug-hunting adventures. Cilie was released from waiting woman duties and sent to report to the chief steward as a maid, but occasionally when Rin looked up from where Tusken had discovered an impressive beetle or a stone shaped like a chair, she would notice Cilie in the distance, watching.

Chapter 5

Isi! Isi! Rin, is she in her rooms?" Enna, a black-haired woman of twenty years swooped into the queen's antechamber, her arms loaded with bolts of silk in red, yellow, and blue. Finn remained on the threshold, one hand on his sword hilt, as if expecting someone to burst in and threaten Enna's life.

Rin sat up straighter, energy rushing into her limbs. She'd known Enna for years as a fellow Forest girl and loved reflecting her manner. It made her feel strong and significant—though it was tricky too, since Enna tended to toss out demands as easily as hellos.

"She's out," Rin said. "Caught in a net of meetings, I'd guess."

"The poor thing. I'll stick around. She's bound to be back soon if Tusken's here." Enna plopped into one of the cushioned chairs and put up her feet. "I swear, this entire palace is teetering on the edge of insanity. And, Rin, you're one of the only ones around with any sense. How do you feel about that?"

Enna gave dark looks to the queen's other waiting women darning hems in the corner. The waiting women returned quiet glares.

Enna sighed, arranging the bolts of cloth on her lap with a look that begged inquiry, so Rin asked, "What's all the fabric for?"

"My gown. I refuse to get married in drab white, of all the ridiculous colors for a wedding day. The thread-mistress wants to make my wedding gown, 'And now, and in a hurry,' says she, 'so pick your fabric if you want to be married this summer, or if you dawdle I'll tell you quick as my tongue can fly that you won't be getting your dress in time and then that moon-eyed young man of yours,' (that's what she called you, Finn) 'that moon-eyed young man of yours won't get his wedding and he'll come blame me. But I'll tell him sure as I'm telling you how can I make a dress without the fabric? I ask you, how?' And on and on she goes as if I had all day to listen. I tell you, some people don't know when to just snap it shut."

Enna looked over her shoulder at Finn as if for his opinion, and he smiled at her, and they smiled at each other in silence for so long that when Enna looked back to Rin again, she had a dazed expression as if she'd just woken up.

"What was I saying?" asked Enna.

“Snap it shut,” said Rin.

Enna’s eyes widened.

“Oh!” Rin laughed, her face burning. How easy it was to say such things around Enna. She needed to be more careful. “I meant . . . not you, I meant that was the last thing you said.”

“Oh. Right. You have a good memory. Well, I need Isi’s opinion, of course. What do I know about fabric for gowns and weddings in palaces and such? I’m still not sure this big hullabaloo in the city is the best idea anyway.”

Finn’s smile deepened. Apparently he knew, as Rin suspected, that Enna did indeed prefer a big city hullabaloo of a wedding to a quiet Forest party.

Razo popped his head around the door and exhaled when he took stock of the room’s occupants.

“Here you are. I went looking for you two down in the thread-mistress’s chamber, and when I asked her where you were . . .” Razo blew out his cheeks.

“Say no more,” said Enna.

“Sure enough, that woman had enough to say for all of us. Hello, Rinna-girl.” Razo knocked her with his shoulder. “I never get used to you in these prettified clothes.”

Rin smoothed the blue light wool tunic over her skirt, feeling the prick of sweat on her skin underneath. She’d sneaked out earlier in her old Forest clothes to run off the raw panic that was creeping over her again, and had thrown on the fine clothes only moments before Enna arrived.

Razo poked at her skirt with one finger, as if it were an animal only feigning death. “Almost want to call you some other name . . . I’ll have to think on that. Rinna-lady, maybe? Naw, you don’t have the lady look.”

“Razo . . . ,” Enna said, scolding in her voice.

Rin tried to echo Enna’s chastising stare.

“What? It was a compliment! Rin doesn’t want to look like a lady, do you? Can’t climb a tree in a fancy skirt. And I can’t imagine you at home in any place where there aren’t a thousand trees to climb at a moment’s notice.”

It was an innocent comment, but he’d unknowingly struck her right in her pain. Rin felt a frown dig into her forehead before she turned and pretended busyness with Tusken.

“Rin,” Enna said, her voice concerned, “now what’s—”

Before Enna could finish, Isi swept in, picking Tusken off the floor and sitting with him beside Enna.

"What a morning," she said, kissing her son's cheek. "I'm glad you're here, Enna. Great crows, but what a morning. Hello, Rin, thanks for watching my boy. Was he good?"

"Always," Rin said.

"Always," Isi repeated. She buried her face into his neck, making eating noises, while the little boy laughed his rough, gravelly laugh. Isi was still smiling at Tusken when she said, "Bad news from the east."

"Ugh." Enna covered her head with a bolt of yellow silk.

"I know, I'm sorry, Enna, Finn. It does look as if the wedding will have to be postponed. But hopefully just for a week. Finn, Geric needs you."

Finn had been sitting on the edge of a table by Enna, one hand on her knee, but now he stood, half-turned to the door, ready to go at command. "What's happening?"

"Oh, probably nothing serious," said Isi. "But after Tira and the war and everything, the ministers clamor to respond quickly to any hostility. A village near our border with Kel was attacked. It could be bandits—though I thought we'd rooted out all the serious banditry that erupted after the war. It could just be a bad tavern quarrel, for all I know. The message was oddly unclear."

"Come on, Isi," Enna said. "You're not going to cancel my wedding for a tavern brawl? Just send one of those those over eager cousins Geric seems to have by the dozens."

"The fact that it's near Kel . . ." Isi glanced at her waiting women, and Rin wondered if she was thinking of Cilie, who was from a border town. "Something is going on in Kel. They sent our ambassador packing, explaining King Scandlan was feeling under the weather and wouldn't be holding court for some time. But the dismissal was suspicious, and given that this new trouble is so near Kel, Geric wants to get there quickly and make sure all is well. He's taking Bayern's Own."

"Really? All of us?" Razo peeked up from where he'd been lounging on the carpet, fiddling with a loose nail on the underside of a table.

Isi barked a surprised laugh. "How long have you been there, Razo? I guess I should know to check under rugs and tables for you. Yes, Geric wants all of Bayern's Own who are currently in Bayern. No time to send for Talone and the rest in Tira, of course."

“Just as well,” said Razo. “I was getting bored. I mean”—he shot a glance at Enna, who was still draped in cloth—“not that Enna and Finn’s wedding preparations aren’t *thrilling*. I guess I’ve never had such a good time in my life as Enna’s discourse this morning on which style of slippers are most—*ow!*”

Razo was interrupted by the slap of Enna’s slipper against his head.

“You’re not going anyway,” said Enna. “You’re the Tiran ambassador’s personal guard now, and that trumps your other duties.”

“That’s right,” Razo said, knuckling his forehead. “Finn, promise me you’ll have an extremely boring time—no adventures whatsoever.”

“None whatsoever,” Finn said.

“That wasn’t convincing at all.” Razo turned to Isi with a pleading expression.

“He’s subtle, isn’t he?” Isi said, looking over her shoulder at Rin.

Rin nodded. “From birth. As a little boy, he was known to scream ‘Smell me!’ whenever he—”

“That’ll do, baby sister,” said Razo. “No one wants to reminisce.”

“You can go if you like, Razo,” said Isi. “I’m sure Geric would be grateful for your eyes and your sling, if the ambassador gives you leave.”

“After some well-placed compliments, she’ll be clay in my fingers. Just wait and see.”

“I’ll wait and see just how eager she is to have a break from you,” said Enna.

“I should report to Captain Brynn,” said Finn. “He’ll want to leave in the morning.” He held out his hand to Enna, helping her stand, letting the cloth tumble to the floor.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

Enna shrugged, though Rin could see she cared quite a bit. “As long as you didn’t invent the trouble to get out of marrying me.”

Both Isi and Razo made doubtful noises.

Enna leaned back to look at Isi. “Am I going too?”

Isi shook her head. “Don’t bother, Enna. It doesn’t sound dangerous. You may as well stay and get everything ready so you can marry that troublesome scoundrel the instant he gets back.”

“He’s some trouble, it’s true, but he’s only a scoundrel when I ask him to be.”

“And only when she asks nicely,” said Finn.

Razo covered his head with his arms. “Ugh, save me from the sauce of their loveyness.”

Isi laughed, but Rin frowned, still going over Isi’s words in her mind. She’d implied that if the situation had been more dangerous, then Enna would have been asked to go. Why? No one else in the room had seemed surprised by that exchange, except perhaps the other waiting women, their faces bowed over their darning, the window light at their backs hiding their expressions.

Enna’s arms were around Finn’s neck. “You be careful. I’ve already had you fitted for your wedding clothes, and it’d be a nuisance if you went and lost a limb.”

Finn whispered something in Enna’s ear. She half-laughed, half-sighed, and he kissed her cheek and then her lips.

“All right, all right,” Razo grumbled, pulling himself off the floor. “If it’s going to get all sticky around here, then I’d best be off to find Dasha and do my duty. She’s bound to get grumpy if she doesn’t get her fair share of farewell kissing.”

“That’s so *noble* of you, Razo, to make the sacrifice,” said Enna.

“That’s me, all sacrifice and nobility. And charm. Don’t forget the charm.” He kept talking as the three left the room. “And we’d better stop by the kitchens to get our own supplies. They never pack the right kinds of food . . .”

At dawn the next day, King Geric rode out with thirty of his personal band of soldiers, Bayern’s Own, Finn and Razo among them. The king was taller than Finn, though not as broad. Even dressed in the same subdued colors for travel as his men, he had something about him that reminded Rin he was the king. Confidence, perhaps, boldness, and an awareness of everyone around him. He shouted to his wife, “No worrying, now!”

Captain Brynn rode beside him and made his own farewell salute to the queen. He was fair-haired by Bayern standards, and though captain of the king’s hundred-band, he had the clever and anxious look of a scholar. Rin could not see Isi’s face, but it must have betrayed her worry, because Brynn shouted, “I’ll protect the king’s life on my own, my queen. I swear it!”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Isi. “You all come back to me as fast as sparrows!”

Rin held a very sleepy Tusken. She'd pulled him from bed to see his father off, and he still had not so much as squeezed open an eye. His ability to sleep like the dead through all that clamor amazed her, and she wondered if she had ever felt so completely content, even as a small child.

"I always worry," Isi said to Rin, watching her husband ride through the palace gates. "But they'll be fine. Of course they will."

The chilly calm in Isi's voice made Rin take a second look at the departing figures, searching for a head shorter than the rest, his hair standing straight up. Razo was her favorite person in all the world, besides Ma. Her other brothers treated her like a smaller and quieter version of their mother. But Razo . . . he wrestled her and let her face get dirty, put a sling in her hand, and showed her the gut-tickling satisfaction of a well-played prank. Each time he'd left the Forest, she'd felt a slap of grief that she'd kept quiet and close. But he always returned a little braver, a little smarter—even a little taller.

She spotted his head there among the dozens, almost too far away to see. Instead of filling her with loneliness, this time his leaving made her afraid.

Chapter 6

Ten days after the departure, a messenger burst through the doors of the queen's antechamber.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty, news from the king's expedition." The messenger's voice cracked from thirst. Isi arose from her seat, clutching Tusken. Dasha, Enna, three waiting women, the prime minister—all were standing, waiting for him to speak.

Razo, Rin was thinking. *Razo, Razo* . . . The tension hurt her skin like a fever burn.

"We were northeast, a day's ride from Kel." He coughed, his dry throat refusing words. Rin shoved a jug of water into his hands, and he gulped it down, gasped, and continued. "The king was attacked. Your Majesty, should I deliver this news in private?"

Isi took in the room's occupants, then asked her other three waiting women and two sentries to step outside. Rin observed Isi's stature and pulled herself a little taller.

The messenger spoke again as soon as the door was shut. "Rumor led us to a village called Geldis, torched to its timbers. The king ordered a search of the area. As soon as we fanned out, the attack came. Fire out of nowhere. Brynn was killed right off, the king and others wounded."

Who was wounded? Who? Rin stared at Isi, willing her to ask.

"Brynn. Oh no, poor Brynn. He was engaged to be married." Isi pressed both hands on her chest as if against a great pain. "He swore to protect him—that was the last thing he said to me, that he would protect the king with his life. How . . . how seriously was the king hurt?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty." The messenger wiped his nose and frowned. "Burned, but alive when I left. The camp-master took him away, and I jumped on a horse to bring the news. I'm sorry. We couldn't see where our enemies hid—or how they were lighting things afire, if you understand me."

"I do." Isi's eyes were cold, intense. "Do you know the names of the wounded?"

The messenger's face filled with regret, but he managed to keep his eyes on the queen. "I don't, Your Majesty. I'm sorry."

“Ma,” said Tusken, pulling on his mother’s sleeve. “Mama, this. Mama, this.” He stuck out his tongue and made a long, wet noise.

Isi rubbed his head. “You are so clever,” she said, trying to keep her tone light.

Enna said, “Let’s go after them! Right now, I’m ready. Isn’t that right, Isi? If Talone were here, he wouldn’t dilly-dally. Who’s in charge with Talone in Tira and Brynn gone? Ratger, isn’t it? I want him here immediately. You, messenger, whatever-your-name-is, draw a map of exactly where you left the king’s party.” Enna opened the door and shouted into the corridor, “You, waiting women, stop waiting and get parchment and food, find Ratger, and get the stable-master and the prime minister . . .”

Isi’s face was pale, and Rin was reminded that the queen had been born across the Forest and over the mountains in Kildenree, where most folk had fair hair and fair eyes and skin that burned easily in the sun. She stayed seated, her breathing stiff and slow as if she were forcing herself to stay calm.

In moments, Enna had given everyone assignments and sent them away, leaving Enna, Dasha, and Isi alone with Rin and Tusken.

“We’ll leave in the morning,” said Enna. “I wager Ratger will bring five hundred-bands.”

“An attack on the king is an attack on Bayern,” said Isi. “Close the city gates, call up the reserve guard, send messengers to warn the border towns. And send an advance party so he—so they know we’re coming.”

“I’ll tell Ratger. But we both know . . .” Enna paused, glancing at the room as if checking for lurkers. “We both know that one good fire-speaker could rout a battalion.”

“You think you and I should go alone,” Isi said flatly.

“Of course I do. We’ve the best chance out of anyone to find the fire-speakers and . . . and subdue them before they hurt any more people. A little whoosh-whoosh with the wind, a few well-placed fires, and we could wrap it up and send everyone home.”

Isi opened her mouth as if she would argue, then shrugged. “You’re right. If they hurt Geric, they might try to kill him next, and others besides.”

“Nightmares, but what a scene. I thought we were going to have some rest before my wedding.”

“I’m sorry, Enna.”

Enna shook her head. “Please. Brynn is dead and Geric is hurt—but not dead. You hear me, Isi? He’s not dead. You think he’ll retreat to Kiltwin, hole up at his cousin’s castle?”

“No, he’ll make straight for home. Straight for me and Tusken.”

“I will go too,” said Dasha.

“That’s not necessary, Ambassador.”

“Please call me Dasha, and I think it is. Since coming to Bayern, I’ve met countless people who lost family members in the war my country started. Every day I’m mindful of that horrible suffering. I don’t want to stand around, being a statue in honor of Tiran cheerfulness. If I go with you, perhaps I can help prevent more suffering. Besides, if the king is hurt, what of Razo? And Finn—”

“Finn is fine,” Enna said.

“But—”

“Razo is fine, Finn is fine,” Enna said with so much heat in her voice Rin almost believed it was true, though surely Enna had no way of knowing.

“And what would happen to our currently amicable relationship with Tira,” said Isi, “if the Tiran ambassador was injured or even killed in Bayern?”

“I just won’t get killed then,” said Dasha. “And I think I’ll avoid injury too while I’m at it.”

“That’s a good idea,” Isi said.

“Thank you, I thought so too.”

“Dasha’s getting pretty good with fire,” Enna said, with some reluctance in her voice. “And she does have the water part that we don’t. Might come in handy.”

Rin’s skin began to tingle. *Fire-speakers. The queen’s wind. Razo asking Dasha if it would rain. Fire. Water. Wind.* They spoke casually, as if, perhaps, they assumed Razo had explained it all to her. Curse him.

Isi glanced her way and Rin remembered herself, thrusting her attention back to Tusken, who was clambering on her back. She was a waiting maid, there to watch the child, not take part in the queen’s council. But her thoughts still churned like leaves in the wind. Everyone knew that in the war between Tira and Bayern, a so-called fire-speaker had burned a tenth of the Tiran army, turning them back from invading the capital. A fire-speaker who could send attacks of fire, burning from a distance. That had been Enna, Rin now guessed. And the rumors about the queen and wind . . . So,

both Enna and Isi could control wind and fire, and Dasha too. No, with Dasha it would be fire and water.

Rin felt like half a girl, a scrap of a person, sitting at the feet of these fearless women who were confident, wise, grown. With a hunger and a hope that felt bigger than her body, Rin yearned to be like them. Especially the queen. If only she could stay close to Isi, listen to her, watch her, perhaps she could learn how to be. Perhaps she could become someone new, someone fixed and good, someone who could go home again.

Chapter 7

Rin woke to the morning drum making rounds through the palace corridors, calling out those who were to leave on the expedition. It did not call for Rin, but she sprang up anyway, sneaked past the sleeping waiting women and ran down to the horse grounds. She'd slept in a travel tunic and leggings, even in her boots, and her leather knapsack was already packed with a hunting sling, a cloak, a change of clothes, a leather waterskin, and bread left over from supper.

The grounds were crowded with wagons and horses and men with weapons. The quaking calm of early-morning bustle surrounded her, the intensity and hurry jarring with the dark sky and sleepy light in the east. She eyed a wagon and considered crawling in and covering herself up with feed sacks. Instead she stood beside it, trying to look bold but feeling pathetic.

Her unease had been bad enough of late, but worry for Razo seemed like to kill her. She needed to know that he was all right. *Keep moving. Stay with the queen,* that was what she had to do.

"Rin?"

Rin startled, her limbs running with cold. Isi was dressed in a brown tunic with leggings for riding, her hair in one long plait down her back, unadorned. She did not look royal. But for her yellow hair, Rin thought she might have fit right in at the homestead.

"Did Enna ask you to come?"

Rin's heartbeats scrambled in anxiety. "No. I'm . . . worried about Razo, and—"

"Majesty." The chief steward rushed to the queen. He had slicked hair and a nose so tiny he seemed to be always sneering. "Majesty, the girl Cilie you sent to me . . . she didn't return to quarters last night."

"I asked you to get her out of the palace while I'm away."

"And I would have, Your Majesty, but she never checked in after chores. No one knows where she is."

Rin felt sick. She'd assumed Tusken would be safe in that big palace surrounded by soldiers, but perhaps not with Cilie slinking about.

Isi was already running back toward the palace, and she shouted over her shoulder, "Rin, come with me."

Soldiers stood guard outside Tusken's nursery. Janissa was asleep at the foot of the prince's bed, and she startled when Isi and Rin entered. Tusken lay curled up in a ball, mouth open, chest rising and falling. Rin bowed her head with relief.

The queen was all focused energy. "Rin, take him down for me? Janissa, help me gather his things."

"Down?" Rin asked.

"He's safer with me and Enna out there than he is alone in a palace with a missing girl who might mean him harm."

A roundish soldier with kind eyes escorted Rin and offered to carry the prince. Rin shook her head. She was not a large girl, but her child-carrying muscles were as strong as pine branches. She set the sleeping boy against her chest and gave him a little squeeze, his heart pressing closer to hers. Warmth gushed through her.

"I love you, Tusken," she whispered.

He moaned in his sleep and stubbornly did not wake even after she clambered into the back of the wagon and the company began the bouncy trek down the city streets. He slept for hours, giving Rin time to think as dawn broke into day.

Keep moving, she thought. Back home, fleeing into the deep Forest had been a temporary reprieve. Escaping to the city had not cured her either. It seemed she was the problem, not the trees. She wished she could run away from herself.

Tusken's wagon stayed in the center of the small army, flanked by Dasha, Enna, and Isi. Rin knew Isi would not casually risk her son's life, so he must be safe with those three women. Everyone must be safe with them somehow. Even Rin. Hopefully Razo too. What a big open world they rode into, how many strange dangers—not the kind she knew, like unexpected falls into Forest ravines or cuts that did not heal. But fire coming out of nowhere, people who wanted to kill. It made no sense. She wrapped her arms around Tusken and imagined how her mother might have felt when she embraced her little girl.

Isi and Rin took turns in the wagon, keeping Tusken entertained or holding him while he napped. When Isi sat with her son, Rin rode the queen's horse.

I'm going to die, Rin thought, *and when Razo hears it was because I couldn't stay upright on a horse, he'll be laughing too hard to mourn.*

In truth, the horse was gentle and walked so carefully, her balance never wavered. But he was a *horse*, a large beast with unfamiliar movements and no expressions to read except the undoubtedly murderous thoughts in his huge eyes.

The third day of travel, they met the king's company as it retreated toward the city. Geric was riding at the head. That he was on horse back seemed an excellent sign, but from a distance Rin could see the bandages. She was standing in the wagon, straining to spot Razo.

Isi cantered her horse forward and Geric set his dappled mare to meet her. They dismounted, Isi throwing herself off her horse, Geric climbing off gingerly. Isi's hand wavered over her husband's bandaged face, white strips of cloth wrapped around half his head and covering one eye, extending over his right shoulder and arm, down the right side of his body. She kissed his left cheek.

"Da!" Tusken was shouting. "Dada! Win—Dada."

Rin helped Tusken out of the wagon and they ran across the field toward Geric and Isi, Enna and Dasha keeping close beside them. Razo was suddenly there, Finn too, unsinged and smiling. Rin discovered she was smiling too, so much that it hurt, and hard dry sobs shook out of her chest.

"Razo, you're all right," she said.

He scoffed. "Of course I am. Who could hurt me?"

"Make camp!" shouted Captain Ratger at a nod from the king. There was a squeaking of leather saddles as riders dismounted, horses nickering at the lift of weight, muffled thumps as packs were dropped. Isi and Geric stood together, talking, a moat of solitude surrounding them. So intently did they look at each other, Rin wondered if anything in the world could have called them out but Tusken.

"Dada!"

"There he is!" Geric scooped up Tusken with one arm.

"What dat? What dat?" Tusken reached for the bandage on his father's face, grabbing a handful of cloth. Geric groaned and pulled back.

"Ooh, careful, Tusken. Da's hurt. Here . . ." Isi took Tusken from his father, and Geric half-sat, half-fell to the ground, his left eye squeezed shut. A physician was at his side at once, feeling his forehead for fever, touching his pulse, calling for water.

Tusken wriggled out of Isi's arms and squatted by his father, patting his good shoulder, his expression mimicking an adult's seriousness. "Sowy, Dada. Sowy, sowy."

"It's all right," Geric said in a croaky voice. "Everything's fine."

All around, cooking fires were being built, horses unsaddled and brushed, bed rolls prepared. The late-afternoon sky was limpid, blue and cool, no need for tents. Dasha and Enna sat on low stools by the king, Razo and Finn at their sides. Rin stood behind them, expecting to be asked to leave, but no one addressed her.

". . . out of nowhere," Geric kept saying. "Just, *whoosh*—fire, all at once. I fell backward off my horse. The worst of it caught Brynn, who was no doubt rushing to save me—a stupidly brave thing to do. The rest got my horse. Poor Springer. She was hurt, and they had to . . ." He cleared his throat. "In moments it was over. The attack wounded eight others, but only Brynn was lost. He died quickly. I'll be thankful for that at least, though I've wished every moment since that I could at least face Brynn's murderer with a sword in my hand." Geric grinned bleakly. "Good time to be clumsy, eh? If I was as skilled a horse master as my wife, I'd be dead."

Isi laughed once, hard, and it made her eyes water.

"They attacked as we approached the village of Geldis. It had been burned completely, its inhabitants taking refuge in Hendric to the east. Sudden fire, and then nothing. I left five men in the vicinity to try and track them. The size of our battalion was a disadvantage when facing this kind of danger. I'm eager to return to the capital and get aid sent to that village. We left supplies in Hendric, but the people of Geldis will need help rebuilding their homes."

"The men you left . . . do you think they're fit to root out a fire-speaker?" Isi asked.

Geric shook his head helplessly.

"Well, you all know what I think we should do," said Enna.

"I can guess where this is going." Geric squinted at Isi. "I don't suppose you're expecting another child, my dear, as you were the last time you ran off on a mission without me?"

"Not at the moment, my dearest. I'm quite fit to travel."

"So you plan to—"

"To track them down, whoever is burning villages and trying to kill you. Enna, Dasha, and I will find them and stop them."

Rin heard Razo whisper to Finn, “Told you they wouldn’t let us go.”

“Blast, this is not what I want!” Geric seemed to want to stand, but he glanced at his bandages and stayed down.

“I know,” said Isi. “I’m sorry. I almost can’t bear to think about it, leaving Tusken, leaving you. But I have to.”

“You don’t have to—,” Geric started.

“You think I’m going to let itchy-skinned fire-speakers come into my country, attack my husband, and hole up somewhere only to attack again? You think I’m not going to hunt them down and burn every hair from their heads and make sure they’re too scared or too dead to ever come near you again? If you think I’m that kind of a woman, then you don’t know whom you married, King Geric.”

She huffed an angry breath. Geric smiled mischievously.

“Stop it,” Isi said with warning in her voice.

“What did I do?” said Geric. “I didn’t do anything.”

“But I know what you’re thinking, and just because you’re all bandaged and in terrific pain and looking pathetic doesn’t mean I’ll let you get away with those little knowing smirks.”

“What’s going on?” asked Enna.

Isi sighed. “Nothing. He just likes to see me get angry.”

“I don’t just *like* it,” said Geric. “I—”

Isi gave him a warning look. “Not another word, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll go.” Finn spoke to Geric but his eyes strayed to Enna.

“That’s right.” Razo straightened up. “If there’ll be a hunt for fire-speakers, you’re going to want me along.”

“I should go too . . . ,” Geric began.

“Oh for all the silliness,” said Isi. “Half your head and arm are burned, you can barely stand up. And when unknown fire-speakers are trying to kill the king, that’s when the king needs to get behind a very tall wall. Besides, someone has to stay at the palace to take care of Tusken and everything else. Yes, I can see that you’re prepared to argue with me some more. Good luck.”

Geric groaned in defeat.

“So it’s settled,” said Razo. “The five of us go.”

“Sorry, Razo,” Isi said. “Our party should be as small as possible, so we can be quick and inconspicuous, and I don’t dare bring anyone along who can’t face down a fire-speaker. I’m feeling quite stubborn about it. Brynn is

dead, my husband was nearly killed, and I'm not in a good mood. You know what damage a fire-speaker can do—and there may be more than one. Enna and I . . . and Dasha . . . we're the best hope for ending this quickly. You all know it's true."

Finn was frowning, but he did not argue.

Geric sighed. "You're right. I don't like it, but you're right." Tusken plopped down on his father's lap and began to click two stones together.

"Keep close watch on Tusken. Cilie may mean harm, and she's disappeared." Isi heaved a sigh as she sat beside him. "I'm just so relieved you're alive!"

Geric rubbed the back of her neck with his left hand. "I'm sorry I made you worry," he whispered.

She cut her eyes at him. "Whoever started that fire—that's who will be sorry."

"Ooh, are you going to get angry again?" He grinned with half of his mouth, and she rolled her eyes.

A physician lifted Geric's arm to remove the bandage. Geric clenched his jaw and shut his eyes, his face turning red with the effort not to scream.

"Sorry," he said through gritted teeth. "Should. Take care of this."

Isi held his uninjured hand while the physician peeled back the bandage. The sight of Geric's raw, blistered skin made Rin's own arm throb in empathy.

To give the king his privacy, Enna departed with Finn and Dasha with Razo. Rin stayed nearby with Tusken, chasing him around and around to get out the cramped energy. Soon Isi called for Tusken, and he ran to his mother and father. He did not look back at Rin, and neither did the queen, her thoughts no doubt with her husband. Rin hesitated but did not think she should follow if they did not call.

She felt forgotten, alone and left with the night. It was what she had been dreading. Nothing to distract her now.

Just beyond the road, a wood beckoned. These were not the trees of her home—their shapes were almost disturbing in their unfamiliarity. She ducked between trees and felt a subtle relief wash over her, brief and distant. For the moment, she just felt glad to be near living things that demanded nothing of her.

She placed a hand on the bark, longing to feel more than pale relief. Her heart cramped with homesickness for that calm that used to root her drifting

soul. But the memory of the elm stopped her—no peace, no relief, just a nauseating wash of slick black hopelessness. She moved her hand away, afraid to try, and sat on the ground.

The air changed with the nearness of night, blowing damp and cool, as if the oncoming darkness were a wave rolling in from Kel's ocean. Rin shivered and tried to take comfort in the fact that good things like night still existed.

Alone, aimless, her thoughts tumbled around her. What did she want? To be all right with her own heart. To lose the dread and disquiet that gnawed at her chest. To go home to her ma and play with her nieces and nephews, and eat bread hot from the oven pit and roast pine nuts and just lie back and feel home again.

But she could not go back where her mother still believed she was a good girl, where family barely noticed her, where Wilem hung his head. The city was so many walls and roofs and talking faces. The only place lately she had felt at home was with Isi. And now Isi was going where neither she nor even Razo or Finn were allowed to follow. Sitting on firm earth, Rin felt as if she were sinking.

Through the trees, she spotted three girls. Their hair was hidden in Forest women's headwraps, but Rin was certain that underneath the cloth, one had yellow hair, one black, and one orange. They were walking to the far edge of camp nearest the wood with Razo, Finn, Geric, and Tusken, making farewells. The fire sisters—that was how Rin had begun to think of them. Three girls who could speak the language of fire. She had no place with those girls, but she ached to. Rin stood, hesitated, tripped forward, and finally ran. Maybe Isi would let her come, if she asked. No, she could not ask, but if she followed . . . By the time Rin emerged from the trees, the girls were lost to the light of campfires, swallowed up by night.

Rin dragged herself back to camp. Both sorrow and relief warred in her chest, and she slumped against a wagon, startling when she realized what was inside. A body covered by a blanket, one scorched boot peering out. Brynn. She remembered when he'd promised Isi to guard the king with his life, his aspect anxious and curious. His hair had been a paler shade of brown, his face long, his build . . .

Something glittered on the edge of her memory, and she looked up into the stars as if for help recalling. Rin had seen him before the day of

departure. In the stable yard. In the distance. The man arguing with Cilie. That had been Brynn.

Rin backed away from the wagon, her fingers and toes tingling. Cilie had wanted to be near Tusken, but not because she loved him, as she claimed. She and Brynn had argued together. Over what? Now Cilie had disappeared and Brynn was dead. Were those events connected?

Rin ran for her pack, her heart thudding in her chest, in her ears. She had to tell Isi . . . well, someone should tell Isi. But now Rin had an excuse to follow, and she seized it like the last hold on the edge of a cliff.

The queen had brought her to watch Tusken, and she could not abandon him.

But he's with his father and an army of soldiers, she reasoned. *And I'm not good to anybody half-crazy.*

Still, she cramped with guilt and worry at the thought of leaving the boy. So she would not leave him without a caretaker. Her pack on her shoulders, she ran toward the edge of camp where she'd last seen Razo, finding him ambling back alone, his hands in his pockets.

"Whoa there, Rinna-girl, what's your hurry?" His gaze roved over the pack in her hand, her boots, her hood. His eyes narrowed, an expression meant to convey wariness, but on Razo it looked comical. "What're you up to? Something sneaky."

"I'm in a hurry, but I need—"

"Uh-uh. Just you remember that I'm your big brother, even if you're as tall as me, and . . . hold on, you're as tall as me! I thought I'd outgrown you last year. How did that happen?" He checked her boots. "You're not stuffing extra socks in there to boost you up? That *would* be sneaky."

"I need a favor. I need you to keep an eye on Tusken from now on, until Isi gets back."

"And does this mean that my baby sister is planning on leaving us?"

Her eyes flicked again to the edge of camp.

Razo caught her arm. "Why're you being so mysterious? What's cooking in that head of yours? Hey, is your hair puffed up higher than normal? Is that why you're taller? I bet it's your hair. That'd be triply sneaky if you puffed your hair just to be taller than me." He patted her head, testing for unnecessary puffiness.

"Please, Razo. You're more experienced with children than half of these soldiers combined and far better at keeping someone safe than I am. Just

promise you'll watch Tusken."

"Uh-huh, and if I do that, you're bound to do something silly like go chasing after Isi, aren't you?"

She looked at him sharply. He picked dirt from under his fingernail.

"If you're not going to talk I'll have to figure it out myself, and I'm not half as slow as our brothers would make you think. Not half. Only about a quarter as slow and twice as charming."

He smiled at her. She smiled back against her will.

"So why would you be following those girls? You just miss Dasha, do you? Or wait, you've been hired by our enemies to kill the queen."

She snorted.

"Yes, I'm afraid that's it. My sister is an assassin. That's why she's so tall. She's hiding a sword in her boots and poisoned darts in her hair. Look, I'd like to go too, but Isi thinks they'll do best alone, and maybe she's right. Besides, Ma would scalp me clean if you got hurt."

"And then you'd be even shorter."

He glared in an attempt not to smile. "You might want to rethink your plan anyway. No chance you'll catch up now, seeing as how they're riding."

Horses. Rin had not considered they'd use those cursed beasts. How was she going to keep up on foot?

"Rin, what's going on?"

Rin sighed. "Cilie, the waiting woman that was? She and Brynn knew each other, though she was from the east and rarely talked to anyone. I saw them alone by the stables, arguing. I don't know what it means, but I think Isi will want to know. And you should tell Geric."

Razo rubbed his chin. "That is too suspicious to ignore. Why don't you tell Geric, and I'll run and tell Isi?"

"No! I need to go. It's not just the telling that matters. I need to keep moving . . . I need to stay with those girls." She shuddered, feeling helpless, but pulled all her energy together to make one last plea. "Razo, please? Will you watch Tusken for me and let me go?"

He stared for a moment before grabbing her and hugging hard.

"Rinna-girl taking after her brother, sneaking around and making plans that'll get her into trouble? I'm so proud of my little Rinny . . . no, that nickname doesn't work. How about Rinna-minna?"

"Razo, they're already gone. I need to go quickly."

Razo stared at the black and exhaled loudly. “Fine. Just be careful. I can’t afford to lose my scalp.”

Rin blinked, her face tingling with the heat of surprise. She had not expected him to agree.

He jogged off toward the line of horses and came back so quickly she’d only had time to stare at the wood and sigh. He was leading a dappled horse, still saddled.

“This is Gladden. She’s nice and easy and was only ridden this past hour, so she’s fresh. I put her brushes and stuff in the saddlebag. You know how to brush down a horse? And saddle her?”

Rin nodded impatiently. She had no idea, but she’d figure it out later. She had to go now. Fear was seizing her, and she was sure she would die if she did not stay with those girls. Irrational, unfounded, but the fear still felt as real as the night. Razo helped Rin mount and tossed up her pack.

“You’ll watch over Tusken?” she said.

“Not a problem. Children are easier than frogs. I had a frog in Tira, and I had to keep pouring water on it all the time and finding worms, and if I didn’t it would make these noises all night, like *graaak, graaak, graaak*—”

“Razo . . .” The fear in her turned icy, the heat in her cheeks replaced by gray cold. She leaned down, grabbed his arm, and spoke with all the urgency she felt. “Keep Tusken safe, here and at home, until his mother returns. Promise me?”

Razo’s eyes widened, surprised by her tone. “Of course I will, Rinna-girl. I swear it on my own life.” His briefly serious expression softened with a smile. “What do a bunch of soldiers and waiting women know about children compared to a fellow like me with twenty-two nieces and nephews?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Twenty-three?” he muttered as he wandered back to camp. “When did that happen? I leave the Forest for a few months and everyone goes off and has babies . . .”

She nudged her horse. The beast made a dry wheezing sound before starting a slow walk, and Rin imagined the mare was laughing at her ineptitude. On foot it was a simple task for her sneak around, but on a horse, she felt exposed, naked, as easy to spot as a full moon.

The floor of the wood was damp from yesterday’s light rain, and she followed hoofprints all through the night, clinging to her horse’s mane and

telling herself, *It's not as bad as leaping into a well. Not as bad as that.*

Part Two



The Wood

Chapter 8

Rin rode through the night, afraid to lose Isi's trail, and even more afraid of dismounting and not being able to get back on the beast again. But near dawn she worried Gladden was as tired as she, so she slid onto the soft earth, still clenching the reins.

She fumbled at the strap, sliding the saddle off and nearly toppling under its weight. Then she tied the horse's reins to a tree and brushed its brown coat before curling up on the ground, the saddle as her pillow.

She slept fitfully, dreaming of the horse bucking her off, of finding the girls only to be sent away, of a yellow snake that dropped from the trees and tightened its smooth body around her throat. She woke for good when a shaft of morning light cut through her eyelids.

Another hour wasted while she tried to saddle the horse. Eventually she managed to lift the heavy thing onto Gladden's back and strap it on, but when she clambered up, her weight made the saddle tilt to the side, the mare prancing uncomfortably. After climbing a tree and dropping onto the saddle, she'd ridden only a few minutes before the saddle leaned even farther over. The horse stopped fast, and Rin was dumped onto the ground. She scrambled for the horse's reins, but no doubt tired of sliding saddles and girls jumping out of trees, Gladden trotted off and was gone.

Tears of frustration made a haze of the trees, and that horrible dead ache in her chest grew so heavy she thought it would stop her heart. She was lost. If she made it back to the road, the king's camp was sure to be gone, and she'd have to walk to the capital on her own. That could take weeks. Worse, she would not be able to find Isi and the others now.

She leaned against a tree and let sorrow rise up to her ears like flood water. Her cheek pressed against bark, she closed her eyes, and for a moment she saw her anxious fretting as if watching it from a distance.

"What am I doing?" she said. "Of all the pointless . . ."

She shook herself, found the hoof tracks, and followed on foot. That path crossed with another set of multiple horse prints, and she followed the new set for a few hours until she heard voices.

Rin sneaked forward. When a girl wanted to be alone in a family of dozens, walking around undetected was an extraordinarily useful talent.

Also, if a girl wanted to climb a tree and dump a bucket of wash water over a certain brother's head, quick and quiet movements were paramount. Rin had years of practice. So she shinnied up a tree, perched near the trunk where branches would shield her from view, and listened.

"I think we should keep to the wood until we're closer to Geldis."

"We would move faster on the road."

"But I'm concerned about watchers."

That voice was definitely Isi's.

Out of habit, Rin mused over the good pranks she could play, hidden as she was in the wood. She could wait until they were asleep and drag Enna and her bedroll off, so she woke up alone and disoriented—that trick was an Aggetkin standard. Dozens of times she'd seen one of her brothers hauling his bedroll back home in the morning, muttering, "Very funny," while the guilty parties snickered out of Ma's hearing.

Dasha spoke again. "Isi, but what about—you said someone had followed us into the wood."

"Yes, but I know who that is now." Isi's voice raised, shouting directly at Rin's tree. "Would you care to join us?"

Rin felt made of ice from her toes to her fingertips. Discovery was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable sensation, and she wondered if Isi had help from the wind. Rin grabbed a branch with her hands, swung out of the tree, and dropped to the ground.

"Rin!" said Enna. "Were you doing an imitation of an enormous squirrel? Honestly, I thought you were the sensible one in your family, but you're half Razo after all."

"That's odd. I was actually expecting . . ." Isi scanned the wood behind Rin. "Did you come on a horse?"

"It ran off. I—"

Isi mounted her black stallion bareback and rode into the trees, her face intent as if listening.

Enna sat on the ground and began sorting through a bag of food. "I give her six minutes to find your horse and come trotting back with it in tow."

Dasha was embracing Rin. "Look at you! What in the—Why are you here?"

Rin shrugged helplessly. Dasha laughed in her pleased way, her nose crinkling in plea sure. "She follows us in the dead of night through a wood full of sticky brambles that leave burrs on your tunic, jumps out of a tree

like a hopping bird, and when I ask her what she's doing, she shrugs. Rin, you are darling!"

Isi returned, just as Enna predicted, with Gladden following behind. Isi did not even have the horse's reins—it just trotted after the queen's stallion like a puppy after its master. The saddle was dangling off the horse's side.

"Have a little trouble with the saddle, did you, Rin?" There was humor in Isi's voice, which relieved Rin immensely. If something was still funny, then perhaps everything would be all right.

Enna laughed. "I'd bet twelve slippers that horse was saddled by a Forest girl. Your horse ran off indeed. Can't wait to tell Razo."

"Your Majes—Isi," Rin said. "I came because there's something I thought you should know. I once saw Cilie arguing with a man, which was odd because she never spoke to anyone besides the waiting women. And I only just realized who it was—Captain Brynn."

The girls waited, looking at Rin, as if expecting more. Rin flushed.

"And . . . that's all. It just seemed odd that Cilie disappeared and then Brynn died."

"That is odd," said Isi. "Was there anything else? Is Tusken all right?"

Rin's face burned hotter. "He was with his father when I left. And Razo swore to protect him. With his life."

Isi nodded. "A great promise." If she was worried, she made no more sign.

Dasha showed Rin how to saddle her horse and they rode all day, Rin expecting every moment that Isi would send her away. But when the blue in the western sky mellowed into gold, the queen still had not ordered her home.

They soon stopped for night. Enna cleared a space of leaves and twigs and piled a heap of dead branches. *A Forest girl should know better than to try and start a fire like that,* Rin thought. *Enna should begin with kindling, then add twigs before—*

"Oh," Rin said, gaping as the pile of branches suddenly blazed, though no one had touched it. *So that's how it works.*

Enna glared at Dasha. "It was my turn to start the fire."

"Oh," Rin said again, realizing it had been Dasha, not Enna.

"But you said I need the practice," Dasha said demurely, stirring the fire with a stick as though it were soup ready for tasting. Her eyes flicked to Enna and then back at the fire. "How did I do?"

“You did fine, as you well know.” Enna pulled a bag of provisions off her horse and began working on supper.

“I just wondered . . . if there’s anything else you can teach me. I mean, I still can’t do as much with fire as you, can’t make big fires or keep creating them as long as you—”

“Nor are you ever likely to. No one can.” Enna sat beside Isi, putting an arm around her waist and tugging as if trying to get her to smile. “Isn’t that right, Isi?”

“No one burns like Enna.”

Rin wished they would explain more, but Enna returned to her cooking. Isi’s eyes flicked to Rin’s face, and she seemed thoughtful.

After a dinner of boiled potatoes and travel jerky, they lay down, but there was only a moment of silence before Enna groaned.

“I’m too jittery to sleep. How about a tale before bed?”

“Maybe something familiar would be nice,” said Isi, “since we’re far from home. Will you tell about the three gifts?”

“No, no, that’s yours. You tell it.”

Rin kept her eyes on the canopy, where the breeze-lifted leaves raked the sky, and listened to Isi’s voice untangle the darkness.

“When the creator made the world, everything had its own language, and all could communicate freely—tree to wind, rock to snail, flower to honeybee. Last of all, the creator made people, and they strode over the land, speaking strong words and taking control. They broke the balance, and one by one knowledge of the languages was lost, leaving creatures deaf to any but their own.

“But as moons rose and fell and days and nights did a spinning dance, different sorts of people were born in the crannies of the mountains and wilderness. Born with a first word on their tongues, they could hear and learn new languages. As they found one another and taught one another, three gifts were named—nature-speaking, animal-speaking, and people-speaking. Though rare, now there were people again who could understand the language of fire and wind, of bird and horse, and of people too. The last, however, proved the most dangerous.”

“I’ve never heard you say that before,” Enna said, her voice soft and sleepy. “The part about people breaking the balance, being the cause that the languages were forgotten.”

“It’s just my own telling.” Isi sighed, her blanket rustling. “But it makes sense to me. People move through this world unlike any other thing. When someone has the knowledge of only a single language—like fire, for instance—it overcomes them unless a balancing language is learned. But I’ve never seen anything that rots a person like people-speaking. It is a gift unlike the others, bound for destruction.” Isi sighed. “Well, that wasn’t a very good tale, was it?”

Enna yawned. “It’ll do in a pinch.”

But Rin was spinning with those ideas—everything had a language, and there were people who could learn them. Marvelous thought, mystifying thought.

“Rin,” said Enna, “Isi and I already know each other’s stories, and I suspect Tiran stories are boring . . .”

“What?” Dasha interrupted. “I—”

“. . . so why don’t you tell one?”

Rin did not feel capable of entertaining three such girls with anything out of her mind. But she glanced at Isi once for confidence, cleared her throat, and chose her words, like picking berries from a thorny bush.

“There was a girl who was friends with trees. Whenever she was sad or lonely, she sort of listened to the trees in a different way and could not really hear them but sort of could. Then she did something different than she’d ever done, wanted something for herself, and the trees stopped being her friends. And she didn’t understand why. So she ran away.” Rin realized she needed an ending. “And she found someone who figured out what was wrong with the trees, or with her, and made it all better.”

There was a long pause in which Rin became aware of the painfully high chirp of a night bird, then Enna laughed. “Rin, that was a really pathetic story.”

Rin smiled sheepishly. “I know. About halfway through I was hoping that you’d all fallen asleep.”

“Not bad for a first try,” Dasha said, patting Rin’s arm. “Think about it some more and tell it again another night, will you?”

Enna and Dasha yawned in unison, and the girls cozied into their blankets. By the time Enna and Dasha’s breathing went from restful to dead asleep, Isi was still staring up at the twisting canopy.

“I liked your story,” Rin whispered.

“Thanks. I told it for you.”

“You did? Thank you, for taking the trouble.” Isi must have guessed Rin had not understood their conversation about fire-speaking.

“Did you tell your story for me?” Isi whispered.

“Oh.” Rin’s chest seemed to be full of breath. “Maybe I did.”

“I’ve never known anyone with tree-speaking before, though I always suspected it was possible.”

Tree-speaking. The word felt like fire in Rin’s mind.

“What’s it like, Rin?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I have—uh, had—tree-speaking. I just listened, sort of, and I would feel different. It’s . . . I can’t explain.”

“Do you mind if I guess? When you were younger, perhaps, some need led you to first hear the trees. You were listening in a different way—and it’s not really like listening. Or feeling or smelling, is it? But something else, a different sense.”

“Is wind like that too? And fire?”

“In a way. What do you understand from the trees?”

“Just . . . calm. It’s easier to think, to feel all right. But I don’t . . . the, uh, the *tree-speaking* doesn’t work for me anymore. I . . . did something. Maybe the trees didn’t like it and they turned away from me.”

Isi moved onto her side, propping her head with a hand. “I can understand some bird languages, and horse too, and I’ve learned that animals mostly don’t care what people do or think. I can’t imagine trees would note the way a person acted, let alone punish you for it. Do you?”

Rin exhaled. “No. I suspected that much. But then I can’t figure why they changed. Or maybe I changed?”

“I don’t know. Will you tell me when you work it out?”

Rin wished now more than ever that she could hear the tree’s calm again, just to have something she could share with Isi. The losing felt as tragic to her as Isi’s story, when the web of languages connecting the world snapped. She felt the mystery of that loss around her, ragged ends of broken webs teasing her skin.

“May I stay with you?” Rin whispered.

“It might be dangerous what we’re doing.”

“I’d still like to stay with you. Isi. Please. I’m better around you.”

Rin was feeling stripped and cold and confused, and she could not find the energy to say anything more, so she curled up tighter, letting her eyes close. The firelight bled through her lids, and she watched swirls of orange

and gold collide as she heard Isi say, “Stay with us, Rin, but be careful. Please be careful.”

Chapter 9

They traveled under the cover of the wood for four days. Kiltwin, a large walled town, lay just beyond the trees to the south, and Isi wanted to avoid it. She might be recognized there, slowing them when speed and stealth could be vital. So they kept moving east through the trees, Isi depending on the wind to guide them.

"The wind carries with it images of what it has touched," Isi explained to Rin. "It's constantly muttering, though it takes some understanding to puzzle out what it means."

So when Isi listened to the wind, she knew of things that were out of sight. She could also send the wind any direction she chose, all from understanding its language. Rin gazed at the passing trees and wondered what else might be possible.

Isi brought them out of the wood near what had been the village of Geldis. It was just debris and embers, heaps of ash. Enna kicked blackened timber and glared at the horizon.

"Where are you? Are you here? I'm here now. Come out!"

Despite the chill icing her gut, Rin did wish those burners would come running at them, and let the fire sisters end it right then. A bird lit at her feet, then flew off; a breeze ruffled loose soil. Nothing else moved.

"Now what?" Enna asked.

"The villagers of Geldis went east to Hendric," Isi said. "So do we."

Hills rolled away from the wood, open farms changing to wooden homes sporting pens of pigs and donkeys. By evening buildings clustered into the town of Hendric, clapboard homes and shops clinging to a crossroads.

The inn was a large rickety structure, the rooms upstairs balanced over an enormous common room, the roof thatched with straw that wriggled and whimpered with mice.

Before leaving the wood, Rin wrapped her hair into a cloth common among Forest women so she would not stand out in her own party. Isi and Dasha felt around their foreheads and necks, anxious that no strand of yellow or orange hair escape to draw attention. Enna blackened their eyebrows with a piece of charcoal.

In the common room that night, Enna and Isi made polite conversation with travelers and locals alike, trying to steer the topic to what happened in Geldis, hoping to find a trail to follow. Rin wanted to help, but there were so many people—eating, drinking, singing, laughing, pushing, shoving, yelling, weeping. She sat in a corner, her arms around her chest.

A droopy-eyed farmer cornered Enna, droning on about how the king was to blame for Geldis. When the hearth fire surged unexpectedly, Isi pulled Enna to a table against the wall.

"We can't draw notice."

"He was an arrogant cow," Enna said, tearing a piece of bread into crumbs. "You can see I showed restraint, since he still has all his hair."

"Truly you are a diplomat," said Dasha.

"I don't see you talking to anyone, Ambassador."

"Because my accent—"

"Lovely excuse. Go on. Take a risk."

Dasha rose dramatically and moved to the next table beside a man with long black and white hair.

"Good evening, sir," said Dasha. "I am stopping this night at the inn and was hoping to find news of the kingdom. May I sit beside you?"

He rolled his head on his neck, shifting his gaze from his ale to her face. "You . . . your voice sounds funny."

"Oh that, well . . ." In her nervousness, her Tiran accent became even more pronounced. "I have a cold." She sniffed.

The man rubbed his own nose. "I've had a cold for years. Ale's the only thing that helps." He sniffed—a wet, grating sound.

Dasha winced. "It doesn't seem to be helping very much."

"You should see me the rest of the time."

"I'm very sorry for that. It must be uncomfortable to be sick, and with unrest about. Sir, you have the face of one who has a deep sight."

The man's crumpled face transformed with a grin. "A deep sight, huh?"

"Indeed. That's why I had hoped to speak with you of all these people. I'm concerned about what happened in Geldis."

"Who isn't? I talked to Geldis folk. They were attacked at night, burned right out of their houses, and no one saw the attackers. Some people say the king himself went to take a look and was killed dead. But a traveler came through last week"—he leaned closer to Dasha to speak low—"asking questions about who'd stopped here lately. My cousin said he had an

accent. Tiran, maybe. You ask me, I say those stinking Tiran burned Geldis, weakening us up before they invade again." His voice grated even lower, his eyes shifting. "Tiran might be in disguise here in this very room. You'll smell them before you see them—they're fouler than skunks."

Dasha stood up quickly, humor battling solemnity on her face. "Thank you, sir. You have been so helpful."

"Don't be so hasty. I'm here alone. I don't suppose . . ." He looked up at her through his eyelashes and gave a short, pathetic sniff.

She shook her head and mumbled, "May your cold improve," as she walked out of the inn. Rin and the other girls followed, and when the inn door shut behind them, Dasha threw herself against the side of the building, coughing out the laugh she'd been holding back. "I love being in disguise! This is fantastic!"

Enna sighed. "Razo's bound to be disappointed at first, but eventually he'll understand that you've found true love."

"Yes, Sniffles and I planned a furtive meeting later by the woodpile, if his da will let him off chores."

"It was impressive," said Enna, "how he identified that peculiar odor all of your countrymen share, as if you've been stewed in vinegar. He didn't smell it on you, but that lapse could be explained by his tragic cold . . ."

Two men and a woman, laughing loudly, came down the street toward the inn. The four girls silenced and moved to the far side of the building.

"People say the king is dead," Isi whispered. She sat on the ground, her back against the inn. "We need to resolve this as quickly as possible."

"Isi, this cannot be Tira's doing," said Dasha. "Last Razo and I were in Ingridan, all was well. The Assembly was confident that peace would continue, the general opinion toward Bayern was positive. I just can't believe the Assembly would send groups to attack the king, let alone burn a little village like Geldis."

Enna snorted. "No, Tira would never march into Bayern like that."

"In the past," Dasha said patiently, "but not anymore. I believe that."

Rin did not know what to think. Razo now lived half the year in Tira, and he seemed to trust them. But just two years before, Tira's army had invaded Bayern without provocation and killed thousands.

Isi looked up sharply just before the two men and a woman appeared around the side of the inn.

“You there, you girls.” The man’s words sloshed, suggesting he’d been familiar with some ale that night. His cheeks were ruddy and his long black hair clumped together. “You. One of you anyway.” He put his arm around the woman and they laughed in each other’s faces. “We want to dance! And my friend lacks a partner. So one of you . . .”

“No thank you,” said Isi.

“One of you dance with him.” The man’s gaze landed on Rin’s face. “You. Come on, one dance.”

Rin’s hands flew to her mouth, and she looked to Isi for help.

“She’s not interested in your kind offer.” Isi stood beside Rin, a warm hand on her shoulder. “But thank you and enjoy this fresh summer evening.”

“One dance.” The man reached for Rin, grabbing her arm.

Enna shoved the man’s hand away. “She said she’s not interested.”

“I didn’t hear her say anything, but you’ll do just as well.” He put his arm around Enna’s waist and hefted her up, dragging her toward the inn.

Rin felt tied up and helpless. Fire would start now, or wind or water, and everyone at that inn would know what secrets the fire sisters kept. She wished she could do something, say something, but she just kept her hands over her mouth and backed away.

Enna was kicking and hollering. The ruckus caught the attention of the inn dwellers, and the doors opened, spilling music, firelight, and people into the street.

Isi and Dasha were on the man, pulling his arm, trying to set Enna free. Isi’s expression was desperate. She was not afraid of the man, Rin could see, but of what Enna might do if the man did not back down.

“One dance,” the man kept saying. “Don’t be so shy!”

The woman laughed at the to-do and the man’s friend was so enthused he joined in, pulling Dasha and Isi back, laughing into his beard in a bewildered way. Rin rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, her hands fluttering around her chest. She’d been trying to imitate Isi’s way these past days, but Isi was so bold, shouting commands. Rin did not dare. Her hands returned to her mouth.

“Stand down!” came the shout as a new figure entered the fray. He shoved the man’s friend to the ground, pulled the man from Enna, and twisted his arm behind his back.

“Finn!” Enna shouted, surprised and angry and thrilled at once.

“You don’t push me!” The friend lurched to his feet, his belly pulling his weight forward. He yanked his sword from a leather scabbard and took steps toward Finn. “Try that again, boy.”

Finn shoved away the clumpy-haired one and drew his own sword, positioning himself between the weaponed man and Enna. “Very well.”

From the unwavering point of his weapon to his unshaking legs, there was no question Finn was a soldier, someone who knew his sword and could use it. His opponent looked him over, his sword tip wavering, dipping. He glanced behind him as if for an escape route.

“Sheath your weapons and walk away,” said Isi.

Her voice was so sure, so full of right and command, Rin was surprised no one was dropping on knees in acknowledgment of the queen. Even not knowing who it was they obeyed, the two men backed away, giving Finn a wide berth. Their woman friend had stopped laughing, and the three of them headed into town, apparently no longer in the mood for dancing.

Isi sighed, glancing at the small crowd leaning out of the inn doors. “So much for not drawing notice.”

“Do you think we should move on to night?” Dasha whispered.

Isi shook her head. “No fires were set. Hopefully this will seem just an ale-inspired brawl. But let’s get off the street.”

With his sword sheathed, Finn lost all his menace, his shoulders slumped and face long, his eyes on Enna. She turned away.

They followed Isi through the crowded common area and up the squeaking stairs to their room. The innkeeper raised his eyebrows at Finn as he followed the four girls inside. Finn shrugged and grinned.

“Oh, Finn, don’t give them more to talk about,” Isi said.

He was last in the room, and he shut and locked the door behind him, seeming to take as long as possible. When he turned to face them, his expression was sheepish.

“I wondered when you were going to show up,” said Isi.

Enna started. “You knew?”

“I suspected. In truth, I didn’t need to hear the wind whispering about a man alone in the wood to figure out Finn would try to follow you.”

Enna put a fist on her hip, and Rin thought to be glad that hot gaze was not directed at her.

“Did you think I’d need you to protect me?” Enna asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. You never know when you need a sword at your back.”

“You thought I couldn’t handle myself.”

“No, I—”

“I’m not talking to you, Finn,” Enna said.

They readied themselves for the night in silence. Finn faced the wall as the girls undressed into shifts and cozied into their cots, Dasha sharing with Rin, and Isi and Enna on the other. Finn took a spot on the floor, laying his body before the door, his head on a bedroll.

Enna yawned. “A tale before bed?” It had become custom their four nights in the wood. Rin had even practiced her own story till Enna had cheered with approval.

“A song would be nice,” said Isi. “And nicer still if you’d sing it.”

Enna glanced once at Finn and quickly away again, keeping her eyes on the window while she sang.

She had a high voice, higher than her speaking voice, but it slipped out of her throat soft and simple. Her song was of a carpenter’s daughter who lay in the branches of an oak tree as if cradled in a lover’s arms and would love no other. Her father discovered her hopeless passion and taking pity, he cut down the tree and carved it into the shape of a man. But to the girl it was no kindness. The tree was now dead, and she wept for the loss of her love. Rin had heard the song before. The way some sang it the story was funny, and she recalled laughing at the girl’s silliness and the father’s inept compassion. But in the dark, with Enna’s voice reaching up and around, there was no humor. Only loneliness.

Dasha rolled over and placed an arm around Rin, a gentle touch, a gesture of friendship. Rin flinched, but the touch made home seem real again, Ma beside her, her tunic wafting wood smoke and juniper, and everything safe for the night.

“Try not to wake us, Dasha,” Enna whispered, “when you leave to meet your beau by the woodpile.”

“I shall pour all my efforts into a stealthy tiptoe,” she whispered back.

Still woozy from the crowd and noise of the inn, Rin slumped into sleep so fast she felt as if she’d been hit over the head.

After a time, her sleep became light, wakefulness and dreams tugging back and forth until wakefulness won. She opened her eyes. The dark was pulsing with remembered images—Dasha daring to speak up while Rin sat

in a corner; Isi and Dasha rushing to help Enna, while Rin stepped back, her hands over her mouth.

She squeezed out of bed and padded to the window and the dim view of town. Ma had said, "The longer you're away from your family and your trees, the more you just might wither away." Rin did feel like half a thing, like a dried-up root. But then again, she had often felt that way. Dasha's vigor for life, Enna's passion, Isi's love—those girls were as full of energy and joy as the members of Rin's own family. And then there was Rin.

Tree-speaking, she told herself. She did not think trees had a language in the same way wind seemed to, or horses and birds. Surely trees could not empower Rin, as fire did for the others. What a strange idea, and she would have tossed it away like a cone empty of nuts, but that Isi seemed so sure. Tree-speaking. Is that what made her feel different, what separated her from everyone else, what crowded her inside until she wanted to scream and flee from her own ugliness? Even before Wilem she'd felt that way. But now she could not go to the trees for comfort—now the wrongness clung to her viciously, weighing her down more and more with each day.

Rin searched for the dark smudge beyond the town that was the wood, strained with her eyes and then with her heart. At least back home she'd been useful to her ma—but what did she have to offer someone like the queen of Bayern? Rin's chest felt like a knot too solid to unpick. Tension buried any hope of sleep, so she focused on the distance where the wood waited, trying to remind her body what it felt like to commune with trees, to hear the sap moving through the limbs, a breeze lulling the leaves . . .

Calmer, quieter, Rin became more aware of everything. She could almost hear Enna exhale before the sound reached her ears. Her skin tingled as if the night was just about to get hotter. Something was strange—something about the air. Rin backed away from the window and leaned over Isi's bed.

"Isi?" she whispered. "Isi? I think—"

There was a noise like wind howling or a voiceless scream. Then the straw roof was blazing.

Chapter 10

Rin fell to the floor as blistering heat stormed above her head.

"Wake up!" she shouted.

Isi was alert at once, upright with eyes wide. A second rush and the wall was boiling with orange and gold flames. Rin grabbed Dasha and pulled her hard, onto the floor as their bed caught fire. The room was engulfed in tearing flames. The heat was so intense Rin could not open her eyes. No breath filled her, the air eaten away. She covered her head with her arms and hoped she would die quickly.

Then wind gushed through the window and blew a hole through the roof. The flames pulled into themselves and extinguished, the heat from those flames bursting into new and harmless fire through the hole and into the sky, leaving a bright streak of smoke. She did not know if it had been Isi's or Enna's work, or perhaps both. When the rafters and walls beaded with water, Rin guessed that much was Dasha, gathering the moisture from the outside air and dousing the embers. Finn was at the door with his sword, scanning the hall for an intruder.

The girls gasped at the air that gushed in through the window, cool as water. From elsewhere in the inn they heard a scream.

In the corridor, the roof began to blaze. People in nightclothes wailed as fiery straw fell on their heads, the corridor so jammed no one could get out. Isi was shouting orders at Enna and Dasha, and Finn fought to stay beside them. Rin was getting pushed back. The wailing, the smoke, the people, all choked her with panic.

The crowd shoved, and Rin fell before the open door of a sleeping chamber. The straw roof sizzled and spit, rolls of flames turning the room gold. A young woman had climbed atop a stool with a baby in her arms. Trembling, she put one leg through the window to climb out. They were three stories up.

Rin ducked under arms, shoved between backs, and flung herself into the room. She grabbed the woman by the hem of her tunic and yanked her back to the sill.

"Let go!" the woman screeched. "We're going to die! I have to save my baby, I have to—"

“We won’t die, not unless you throw yourself out that window. Come down.”

The woman turned, and her eyes were frightening, wild and dangerous with fear. “My baby will burn, my . . .” She began to weep and clawed at Rin to break free.

“The fire will stop,” Rin said, coughing from the smoke.

“We’ll burn!”

“Listen to me, the fire will stop! It will stop. Come down here now, come down with your baby and you’ll see. The fire will stop.”

The woman gasped, as if Rin’s words were a pocket of fresh air inside the smoky room. “The fire will stop?”

“It’s already out, see?”

The hysteria cleared from her eyes and she clutched her baby to her chest, blinking and looking around. Smoke tickled their eyes, blackened straw dusted their shoulders, but there were no flames, no heat.

“I’ve never seen . . . but it’s gone. You said it would.” She stared at Rin, dazed and desperate. “What do I do now?”

“You grab your things and take your baby outside. You can do that?”

The woman nodded. “I can do that.”

Rin watched her go. The frenzy in the corridor had quieted with the fire’s demise. She could hear Enna shouting something, Finn directing people downstairs.

“The fire will stop,” Rin whispered. Feeling like an empty grain sack, she sat down and sobbed into her arms. That mother and her child would have died from the fall. It was a good thing to help them, it surely was. So why did she feel like a very bad girl due a wooden spoon beating? Guilt and confusion and sorrow gnawed at her, and running away sounded so promising.

Isi wouldn’t run away, Rin thought.

She heaved herself to her feet, collected their things from their room, and trudged down the corridor, passing empty rooms full of charred and damp wood. The stairs shuddered beneath her feet.

The girls and Finn stood in the road, staring at the blackened inn as it groaned and leaned to one side. Dasha and Isi were retying their headscarves over their conspicuous hair, but none of the dazed travelers in nightclothes looked their way. Gathered in small groups, they whispered and cried, never letting their eyes stray from the ruined building.

“That could’ve been my grave right there,” someone said. “I sleep like a tree most nights. Good fortunes, that could’ve been my grave.”

“That fire started pretty suddenly, don’t you think?” Enna whispered. “Spread quickly too. Funny that.”

Other townsfolk on the crossroads were opening windows, creaking doors, blinking into the night, judging whether what they were missing was exciting or dangerous.

Rin still felt spooked, her muscles tense, begging her to run. *Be calm,* she told herself. She inhaled, drinking in night—her favorite time, when the world was scrubbed of edges and hardness—and tried to remember how it used to feel to lean into a tree, hear its deepness with her own. While seeking that stillness, she looked around, taking in the moment.

Everything seemed slowed, easier to see. And in that stillness, she noticed a figure. Every other person either stood before the inn as if they’d just escaped its smoky ruin, or in the doorways of their homes afraid to emerge. But one man rushed away, no protective home around him, no sign of ash on his clothes. Even from a distance, she could spot that no-good look of a man with something to hide. She exhaled, letting the moment go. The seeming slowness fell away, and she decided she had imagined it.

“I bet he knows something.” Rin gestured to the figure now bolting toward the cover of trees.

Isi nodded. They all ran, ducked between two cottages, and emerged facing the wood, no one in sight. Isi paused, her head cocked, and Rin guessed she was feeling something tangible in the air, listening to what images the wind brought her.

“Another house, through the trees. He’s in there.”

“Let me go first,” said Finn.

“Not a chance,” said Enna. “You stay with Isi.”

She ran ahead, her white shift outlining her form against the night. Rin had stuck on her boots but still wore only a shift too, the cool air creeping up her legs and bringing out goose bumps. They followed Enna through trees and tree shadows until the darkness peeled back and the gray outline of a roof poked through the gloom. As one they slowed, creeping as they neared. Rin could make out the little house now—wood, no windows, one door in front. Enna moved faster than the others, and Rin suspected she was determined to put herself in front of Isi in case of danger. Finn did the same, walking now between Isi and Dasha and slightly ahead.

That's what I should do, thought Rin. *That's what Razo would do. Be brave, run into the fray.*

Rin quickened her pace, gaining on Enna.

"Rin," Dasha said with warning.

The sound of her whispered name tingled through Rin, made her whole body more aware of the danger. That man might be the one who tried to roast them in their beds, and he might burst through that door and burn them like Geric, like Brynn.

Better me than the queen, Rin thought. *Better me than the Tiran ambassador. Better me.*

She stepped from heel to toe in fluid motion, balancing herself from her pelvis outward, mindful of twigs and leaves. Her passage nearly silent, she aimed to get to the house first. Perhaps she was not powerful like Finn, Enna, and Dasha, but Rin yearned to show Isi that she was worthwhile in some way so she could stay with the fire sisters. If she got to the house first, she might warn Isi if the man was truly inside and if there were others.

Rin moved faster, but Enna would not be left behind and broke into a jog. Enna's foot came down on a stick. The crack seemed to make the entire wood tremble. Rin froze. They all did, breaths held, feet midstep. The door did not open.

Enna exhaled softly and started to whisper, "I think—"

The door slammed against the house and a bolt fired from a crossbow. Rin felt a shout heave from her throat as she raced forward. Wind howled. Fire burst in the air, lighting the scene in a brief, eerie flash of orange. The man hollered and dropped the crossbow before he could reload, the weapon ablaze in his hands. Then Finn was upon him, yanking both the man's hands behind his back. Rin glanced down at her own body, at the other girls—no sign of the bolt. She had a nudge of instinct to look high to her left, and by the light of the burning crossbow she saw the bolt stuck in a tree where the wind must have blown it off course.

"Back into the house," said Enna.

"We won't hurt you," said Isi.

"I don't think we can promise that exactly. But we won't unless we have to."

"We just have some questions," Isi continued as if Enna had not spoken.

Finn pushed the man inside. Rin followed, last this time. She looked back at the bolt, stuck deep into a solid trunk. The wood was quiet and so dark.

There could be others out there in the trees, pointing loaded weapons at her even now. Rin had never realized that the world was so full of sharp things, and how many people were eager to use them.

She turned her back on the night and hurried into the house, pulling the door fast behind her.

A small, mean fire sputtered in a hearth so full of ashes, Rin wondered the flames did not suffocate. By the halfhearted light, she could see the man's face—he was old enough to be a grandfather, though she could not imagine that haggard face ever kissing a child. His hair was probably white, but so greasy it turned a mottled gray, and his beard grew patchy across his jaw. If he'd been a dog, Rin would have assumed he had the mange.

"Have a seat, sir." Isi pointed to the room's only chair, and he took it roughly, sitting down so hard the wood complained. Finn stood behind him. "I believe you aren't the one who set fire to the inn to night—"

"Ha!" said the man.

"And I also believe you know who did. Who was it?"

The man spit on the floor. Enna shoved her way between Isi and the man.

"She asked you a question, and we're not leaving until we get a good answer. So tell her, what do you know about the burning?"

He spit again on the floor, marking the hard-packed dirt with a splatter of wet.

"You just keep at it," Enna said, folding her arms. "Spit all night and all day too. I don't have to live in your slimy house."

The man gathered more saliva in his throat, taking his time with it, making an unappetizing grinding sound before he pointed his lips at Enna's face and spit. Before the spittle could reach Enna, wind flew between them, smearing the wet glop over his own face.

"Argh!" he yelled, scrubbing his cheeks with his soiled tunic.

Enna laughed, a surprised, ecstatic laugh that bounded out of her belly, and she exchanged pleased looks with Isi. Rin guessed that both of them had sent wind.

Then Enna was in the man's face, holding his tunic by her fist. She stared straight into his eyes, and he blinked for the smoke. Because smoke was twisting out of his tunic above the spot where she grabbed him, curling into his face. Unease made lines around his mouth.

"I could fizzle your little abode into ash in the time it takes you to spit again. And I'd enjoy it. Are you starting to comprehend your situation?"

The man blinked rapidly, the gray plumes drifting through his lashes.

"I think you know that I don't care two eggs for you or your saliva-strewn home, and the only reason I'll leave it standing is if you give me a more interesting direction to go. So tell me—where?"

Rin could see the man was both angry and afraid, but he shrugged in an attempt to pretend indifference. "Doesn't hurt me to tell you. She'll want to see you, way I hear it. Go on to Kel, then. Go north across the border from Saxmer, that's where her boys came from. You're bound to find her. Or she'll find you, the way I hear it."

"She?" Isi frowned. "Who is she?"

"Who? The one who'll fry you up for breakfast."

"Not ringing a bell," said Enna.

He spoke slowly, as if they were hard of hearing. "The queen of Kel. Imagine not knowing who it is wants you dead."

"We're being truthful with you, sir," Isi said in her most regal voice. "I expect you to be the same."

"I think he believes what he's saying," Rin whispered. It was one way she could be useful.

Isi gave Rin a curious look.

Enna leaned her hand on a small table, her attitude unimpressed. "And just how do *you* happen to be chummy with the queen of Kel?"

He coughed as a tendril of smoke tickled his nose. "Don't know her myself. But I met a couple of her boys—they'd been staying in town, though they're gone now, I'll wager. They gave me gold to keep an eye out—didn't know there'd be five of you, said there'd probably be two, and when I heard you were poking around last night at the inn, I told 'em. They made you a little wake-up present, did they? Wakey-wakey, little girls!"

The talking brought back his gall, and he laughed in Enna's face, spit flying at her eyes. She blinked, and the small wood table beside her exploded into flame so hot it crumpled and died into a heap of cinders. A pool of water curled around the spot, cooling the remains and slicking the floor with ash. The man's eyes widened, and he swallowed.

"If you follow us," Enna said darkly, "or let her know we're coming, that black greasy clump will be you. We have ways of knowing." Rin could tell Enna was lying about that last part, but the man seemed convinced.

Then Enna smiled brightly. "Good evening to you, fine sir!"

The five of them walked toward the inn, Finn and Enna keeping an eye on the house until they were out of sight. Isi fell in next to Rin.

"You believe he was telling the truth?"

"He thought he was. I'm pretty sure." Rin shrugged. "My brothers play a bluffing game, but a few years ago they stopped letting me join in,'cause I never lost."

"I wonder . . . do you think there's something about tree-speaking that gives you a talent for seeing others more clearly?"

"I . . . I don't know. I thought about what you said, how animals don't care what people say and do. The same would be true of trees, I think. Why would they care or notice if a person lied?"

Well away from the house, they paused to pull clothes from their packs and dress. Isi sat on a fallen log, Dasha and Enna on either side. Finn positioned himself behind Enna. Dasha made room on the log for Rin, but she leaned against a tree, tucking herself in between its thin branches. There was a hollow comfort standing like that, and while the others spoke, Rin thought of the crossbow bolt. Of the whoosh and sting of wind and fire heat and the man who would have killed her. Of pushing in front of Enna. Of almost dying. Of home and Ma and being farther away than the lands in tales, and maybe never going home. Of standing by a strange tree in a faraway wood with girls who spoke the language of fire. Of a queen of Kel who wanted them dead.

The girls talked. Rin listened and thought about the crossbow bolt.

"I think my tactics worked rather well," Enna was saying.

"Diplomacy might have been more efficient," said Dasha. "And spared us some of the spitting. People appreciate it when you take the trouble to flatter and understand—"

"People like clumpy-head back there appreciate exactly two things—their own smell and the fear of an immediate and uncomfortable death."

"Perhaps next time we could try my way. Is that all right, Isi? We might take turns with our various approaches and so perhaps avoid having to wash our boots after each encounter?"

"My questioning got at who's behind all this, at least."

"Actually, we still don't know much," said Dasha. "You see—"

"There is no queen of Kel," Isi finished.

"I knew that. I was just . . ." Enna sighed. "Never mind, I didn't know that."

“Rin says he believed what he claimed,” said Isi, “so either he was lied to or things in Kel have changed quickly. It’s only been a few months since our ambassador was dismissed from Bressal. I wonder what is happening there, what King Scandlan is doing . . .”

Enna picked up a stick and began to dig at a root. “I couldn’t care less for Kel or her queen. But someone who *claims* to be the Kelish queen is sending fire-speakers out in the night to burn Bayern villages, and that makes me grumpy. So I’m all for tracking down this ‘she’ and telling her, very politely, that in Bayern, burning down inns just isn’t good manners. And then char every hair from her body.”

Finn smiled behind Enna’s back, enjoying every word.

“So you think that the burnings were caused by cultural impoliteness?” said Dasha. “Interesting. You will notice that there are several buildings in this quaint little hamlet, and the one we happened to be sleeping in was the only one marred by fire.”

“You noticed that too, did you, Ambassador? Well, Isi, I guess I’m going to have to take back some of the things I said about Tiran lack of observation.”

“Wonderful. My real concern right now, not an hour after someone tried to murder us in our sleep, is what you think about the perception skills of my countrymen.”

“Thank you, girls,” said Isi. “That will do. What do you think, Rin?”

Rin startled. She’d been feeling invisible all night, a stranger lurking on the edge of big events. Isi’s attention pulled her from the shadows and surprised her thoughts out of her.

“I think that Enna and Dasha don’t really dislike each other as much as they pretend.”

Enna and Dasha both made surprised noises in their throats, something like, “naw” and “yee.”

Isi smirked. “Indeed. What I meant to say is, do you think we’re being targeted?”

Rin had thought about this too. “First a village was burned. That brought the king. He was burned, though not killed. That brought the queen. Then the inn was burned, though again, you weren’t killed. Either they’re trying to kill Bayern royalty and they’re failing, or the point of the attacks is to provoke you. To do something. Maybe to go somewhere?”

“The Tiran,” said Enna. “They’re trying to restart the war.”

“Enna,” Isi said with warning.

Enna rolled her eyes. “Or I guess it could be Kel. Maybe they’re using the tension between Tira and Bayern as an excuse to spark a conflict with us. See, I don’t always jump to the Tira-is-evil conclusion.”

“Kel doesn’t usually tend toward belligerence,” Finn said.

Isi nodded. “Their navy is formidable, protecting them from a Tiran sea invasion. Their most serious threat would be a Bayern ground attack, but the rough terrain isn’t hospitable to an invading force—bogs, woods, crags. And they’ve always been eager to make treaties and be a valuable trade partner. Why would they suddenly stir up trouble? It doesn’t make sense.”

“So it *is* Tira,” said Enna. “See, I knew they were evil.”

Dasha made a noise of annoyance.

“I was kidding, I was kidding!” Enna said, then she added in an undertone, “Mostly. Anyway, we don’t know if Isi was the target in the inn. I’m the one who burned a tenth of Tira’s army. If anyone’s looking for vengeance—”

“If we are coming up with reasons people might want us dead,” said Dasha, “I think I can play that game. I am the ambassador of Tira, responsible for thousands of deaths and injuries during the war.”

Enna looked at her blankly. “You killed and injured thousands of people?”

“I meant,” Dasha said through gritted teeth, “that my country’s army caused the damage.”

“Oh, because that’s not what it sounded like. I would’ve thought that, being a well-versed diplomat, you’d know how to speak straight.”

Dasha threw up her hands at the sky.

Enna sat down and started to laugh so hard her body shook. “I’m sorry, it’s just that we were almost burned alive to night, and someone’s hunting one of us down and is not afraid to kill anyone who gets too close . . . and I haven’t slept well in a week, and I’m supposed to be married by now and . . . and . . .” Her voice squeaked as she tried to suck in more breath through the laughter. “And Dasha said she killed thousands of people . . . and . . .” She took two deep stuttered breaths, wiped her eyes, and looked up at Finn, who stood behind her, touching her hair. She flexed her shoulders as if about to shrug him off, but then just sighed. “And I forgot what was funny. I wish something was funny. Nothing’s funny.” She looked at the queen. “Sorry, Isi.”

Isi shrugged. “I have an unreasonable hope that things will be funny again soon.”

“Promise?” Enna’s voice was soft and pleading, a tone Rin had never heard from her before, making her sound like a small child in need of comfort. Finn squeezed her shoulder.

“We’ll figure this out and get you and Finn married in a few days,” said Isi. “And then we’ll laugh for hours.”

Enna put her hand on top of Finn’s and looked at the huge darkness before them. “All right. All right. That’s all right. A few days.”

“Finn?” said Isi. “What do you think we should do?”

“Go to Kel,” he answered without hesitation. “Cross the border by Saxmer, like clumpy-head said.”

“That could be this so-called queen’s intention all along,” said Dasha. “To herd us into Kel.”

“I worry about that,” said Isi, “but it’s our only indication where to find these burners. I don’t want to see another village razed like Geldis, another victim like Brynn or Geric. And sadly I think that will be our last inn on this journey. If we’re attacked again, I don’t want to be around others who could get hurt too.”

Finn was looking over Isi’s small map. “If we cut through this wood, head north by northeast, we should get to Saxmer in . . . maybe four days? We’ll have to go on foot. This isn’t a path for horses.”

“And so we lose ourselves in the wild,” said Dasha.

“Right.” Enna stood, brushing off her skirt, and her manner was so *Enna* again, Rin questioned her memory of the girl’s momentary insecurity. “I can help with the losing ourselves part, but as for surviving in the wild on these meager provisions”—Enna shook her bag—“I’m one Forest girl who never cared for straying far from my bed.”

Dasha hooked Rin’s arm. “So what do you say, Rinna-girl? Think you and Finn can keep two city-bred noble ladies and a home-fond Forest girl alive in all these trees?”

Rin’s eyes went wide. She whistled a note that plunged from high to low, and she said as Razo might, “City-bred is half-dead.”

Finn snorted.

Since they would be going on foot, someone needed to return to town and arrange for their horses to be sent back to the capital. Enna’s gray

Merry was virtually her pet, and the queen was very attached to her black stallion Avlado.

Finn volunteered. He'd been carrying the packs Rin salvaged from the inn, and he set them now at Enna's feet. She did not acknowledge him, though he waited for a few moments before turning toward town.

"Wait, Finn." Isi's hands clutched together, suddenly nervous. "I . . . I didn't want to do this, but Geric should know. He needs to know where we're going, that there's a rumor of a queen in Kel, that she wants us dead. He should know soon."

"Send a message with someone in town, Isi." Enna stood up, a touch of panic in her voice. "Write a note and send it."

Isi shook her head. "I don't trust a message to be kept safe, or fly with the speed we need. Finn, I'm sorry, I've got to send you back."

He stepped forward as if he would argue, but checked himself, nodding.

"Rin," said Isi.

"Please, no." The thought of being sent away created eddies of panic inside Rin.

Isi considered, then nodded. "Rin, you stay with us, but be careful, no more rushing ahead of everyone." She gave Finn some coins. "Give three to the innkeeper to help with repairs, the rest are to get you back. I doubt you'll be able to buy supplies in Hendric to night, but it's not far to Keltwin, and there is a little food and water in our saddlebags. Don't kill yourself or the horses, Finn, but go quickly."

He nodded again, then his eyes went to Enna. She moaned sadly, came forward, and melted into his arms. He lifted her up and squeezed her hard, sighing as he did, his face relaxing. He pulled back to kiss her, three long farewell kisses, then left without another word.

Enna watched him go till he was out of sight. Then she sighed, and the look on her face left no doubt in Rin's mind that Enna loved Finn more than the moon and the night.

She whispered, "I'm going to have to have a little chat with the queen of Kel."

Chapter 11

No one felt sleepy, and the night was chilly enough that the thought of sprawling on hard earth made walking on preferable. Near sunup, they snuggled into cloaks and rested for a few hours, waking to glare at the late-morning sun as it slanted into their eyes.

"I hate them," Enna said. "Whoever is responsible for making me sleep outside without pillows, I hate them."

"Mmm-hmmm . . . ," Dasha said. Rin had noticed that the Tiran girl often had trouble remembering how to speak in the morning.

"If Finn were here," Enna continued to mumble as she rewrapped her head cloth, "he'd let me rest my head on his chest at night. Or leg. Or arm. And then he'd find whoever was responsible for the whole sleeping outside with no pillows situation and hold him while I kicked him in the shins."

"Hmm . . . ," said Dasha.

"In the shins. Hard."

"Just don't you let go of that lofty dream, Enna," said Isi. "Four or five days to Kel, where we just might have time for some shin kicking."

They set off in silence, Isi in the lead, and Rin could see the worry in Isi's face, thick as a rainy sky.

"Something troubling you?"

"What isn't?" Isi rubbed her head as if to get at an ache. "I can't shake the coincidence that we're dealing with fire-speakers again."

"I've been musing that over too," said Enna. "Before me, there were only those fire worshippers in Yasid, and they kept to themselves. Then I learn it and suddenly . . ."

"Fire-speakers in Tira," said Dasha. "And now in Bayern, leading us to Kel."

"Fire wants to spread," said Enna.

"You have a point," Isi said. "It seems to be the easiest of all the speaking gifts to learn."

"But not to master."

"No, you're right—easiest gift to learn, hardest to master. Except maybe people-speaking."

“Blegh,” Enna said, as if trying to rid her mouth of a sour taste. “Don’t call it a gift. Curse, maybe.”

Isi nodded. “All the people-speakers I’ve known were—”

“Evil,” said Enna. “Dark-souled, likely to chew their own grandmother’s eyeballs—”

“I was going to say, corrupted by their gift.” Isi blew hair out of her eyes, her gaze rising from the deer track they walked to the shifting trees. “It’s sad really. You’d think people-speaking would bring the speaker closer to people, as wind-speaking does with wind. But instead it dooms people-speakers to separation and self-destruction. I think people-speaking is the most dangerous gift to have alone, with nothing to balance it.”

“Even more than fire?” asked Dasha.

“I think so anyway. I’ve known three people-speakers, and two died young. I wonder if a person can exist long with such a burden. My mother—she must have something else balancing her, maybe without knowing it. Because she was difficult, but not as bad as some.”

“Sileph,” said Enna. “Selia.”

“People-speakers?” asked Dasha.

“Yes,” Isi said. “They’re both dead.”

There was a smile in Enna’s voice. “Nice to have something out there more dangerous than fire. Makes me feel like a tame kitten.”

“Watch out!” Rin said.

The three girls stopped short as a snake startled across their path. Rin was carrying a forked stick for just such an event, and she jammed it against the neck, pinning the creature. Dasha gasped.

All three girls were staring at her in horror. Rin winced, and her face flushed.

“It’s . . . for dinner, you know. Snake meat. So we don’t run out of food.”

Still, she did not move to pick it up, staying as far away as the stick would allow. Isi and Dasha took several steps back, gaping at the green squirmy body in pale silence before Enna sighed.

“Fine, I’ll skin it.” She grabbed it by the neck and with a quick twist the squirming ceased. Dasha emitted a trembling little moan, which made Enna grin.

They roasted the meat that evening, along with a rabbit Rin had downed with her sling. Rin had eaten snake before—she’d also eaten boiled ants, roasted slugs, snails baked in their shells, and grasshoppers relieved of their

spiny legs and warmed on a stick over a fire. Often in the thin of winter, she'd munched pine bark, and one memorable spring, a handful of maggots. But she did not think it necessary to turn over logs for dinner just yet. It was late summer, so fallen nuts and bright berries were tangled in the brush. She showed the girls how to spot edible mushrooms and stew a broth of grass and pine needles, chewing on the tangy needles to boost their spirits between meals.

Rin had been sure that a few days without silver flatware and servants would turn Dasha into a blubbering baby. But Dasha sang as she tromped through thickets and bragged about the collection of burrs she sported on her leggings.

The first time Rin gave her a cattail root for dinner, Dasha took a bite and exclaimed, "It *is* food!"

Enna was staring. "What did you think?"

"Well, I know you said it was, but who knew that food can just grow from the ground like that outside a crop field?"

Enna was still staring. "You make it really easy, Dasha. I don't even have to say anything."

Dasha took another bite and giggled. "Rin, you're amazing. It's all so amazing. I *love* the wild."

Enna leaned to Isi and whispered loudly, "I know I promised you I'd be better, but I just have to—"

"No," said Isi.

"But she's practically begging me to mock her, and I just thought of—"

"Shush, Enna."

"But—"

"Eat your root, fire girl."

"Fine. But it was going to be funny."

Rin never got tired of hearing Enna talk, and Dasha too—marveling at how they spoke without thinking first, seeming so relaxed, untroubled. Isi was different. Perhaps that was part of being queen? Rin guessed Isi was constantly aware that everything she said and did might affect not just herself but all of Bayern. No wonder she often seemed weary with caution.

Maybe that's why I feel best mirroring her, Rin thought, for while Isi took care with words, she also had a confidence, a sense of place that Rin lacked. If Isi's queenship explained her caution when speaking, Rin did not know

where her own came from. Ever since the inn burned, Rin had been dreaming again of the gray worm curled in her middle, stretching.

Sometimes they traveled through grass-tangled meadows and streams with wide sandy banks. But whenever they were deep in trees again and could not see the sun, Isi would ask Rin the direction, and Rin could point and say, "Northeast."

"How do you know?" Dasha asked with an awed smile.

"Moss grows on the north side of the trees and rocks."

"But that rock has spots of moss all over it."

Rin did her best not to laugh. "That's lichen."

"Oh. But what if there's no moss and it's high noon?"

"Most trees lean south."

Dasha squinted. "I don't see them leaning anywhere. Huh. You are so smart, Rin."

It felt odd to hear that from Dasha—the ambassador of Tira, a noblewoman, a girl who could read books and do numbers. Rin was finding it difficult to keep resenting her. Pretending Dasha was a friend of Isi's who had nothing to do with Razo made walking beside her and sharing her blanket at night much less trying.

With the grudge in abeyance, Rin noticed just how spectacular Dasha was with the water-speaking—leading them to drinking water, encouraging stream fish into a trap, and even keeping them all dry in a rainstorm.

One evening lightning flashed, for a dazzling moment revealing the white skeleton of the world. The image stayed in Rin's eyes after it all went dark again. She shivered. In the buzz of hot light, everything had seemed made of bone—pale and hard, standing on shadows. She thought of crossbow bolts and queens who burn crowded inns.

"Rain," Dasha warned.

The four girls clustered together, and when the clouds sighed and released the torrent, the rain bent away as if an invisible roof peaked above their heads, sending the drops out and down on either side. Dasha laughed, as pleased with herself as a child learning a new trick.

Dasha's water-speaking had proved essential, Isi's wind-speaking brought word of game to hunt or people to avoid, and the fire-speaking lit their fires at night. Watching the fire sisters work their own talents, Rin felt even sharper regret for losing her communion with trees.

This wood was different than her own Forest of creaking pines and crackling aspens, where the thick canopy kept the ground tidy. This wood was wild, slashes of sunlight lancing the air, a disarray of brambles and ferns and bushes. And it felt so alive it seemed to be crawling outward, expanding its roots, lifting into saplings. The trees were constantly pulling themselves down and sprouting anew, keeping the whole wood young, throbbing, hissing with life.

New trees, vibrant trees. How would she feel inside their thoughts? At home, succumbing to a tree's green sounds had lifted her anxiety momentarily. Was it possible that these trees could change her, make her a new Rin? The desire was like the constant itch of a bug bite, and she feared scratching would only make it worse.

The third evening after Hendric, while the fire sisters prepared dinner, Rin crept just out of sight. She approached a slender tree rich with glossy leaves and imagined closing her eyes and falling into that half-sleep where the ground seems to lift and then sink, where Rin became not herself, not the thinker, but a figure seen from a distance, a character in a story someone else was telling. No real thoughts, no worries, just the steady, nearly silent hum of water and sap moving out through the branches, twigs, into the veins of each leaf, the feel of that pulse making her calm and sleepy as a well-fed baby wrapped in blankets.

Tree-speaking. Ever since Isi had named it, Rin missed her closeness with trees like she missed her own ma. And maybe if she could get it back, she would discover new things, understanding empowering her as fire and wind strengthened Isi.

Rin's forehead touched bark, she closed her eyes and opened herself inside to sense, to hear, to feel . . .

And was blasted with a sensation of loathing, filling her like maggots bursting from an animal corpse.

She recoiled, her whole body shaking, and hurried away from the tree.

Never again, she told herself. *I'll never try again.*

The decision felt as final as death.

Isi glanced up as Rin stumbled into camp. "You all right, Rin?"

"I'm fine."

A lie. Maybe a harmless one, but it stuck in her mouth, tasting bitter, and she could not shake a feeling that she'd forgotten something important.

I lied to Wilem too.

Rin shuddered. It was a thought she'd been fleeing from, and she refused to think it now. Running into the world had not changed her, as it had Razo. She'd stayed close to Isi and tried to be like her, but she was still just Rin—lying, broken Rin. And these fire sisters knew her no more than her family back home. They were only fooled by her, charmed by her seeming sense, when all she did was try to reflect them back to themselves.

I'm the sheen on water, Rin thought. *I'm a looking glass. I'm not real.*

But she seemed to have no choice—she had to keep moving. Was it the tree-speaking that made her feel so wrong? Or perhaps the peace that had once come with tree-speaking had temporarily numbed the truth—that Rin herself was rotten at the core, bug-eaten and damaged, a diseased tree with shallow roots, a hollowed trunk with yellowing leaves.

Rin kept listening to the girls, her eyes on Isi, studying how to be wise, noble, unafraid. How to be less like Rin. She watched, but the lump of hopelessness hardened inside her. On they walked. And Rin felt farther and farther away from herself.

Chapter 12

Isi kept them in the wood past Saxmer, emerging from the trees to join a trade road leading from Saxmer to the Kelish village of Cathal.

"Cathal hugs the border, and trade with Bayern is common, so folk there should speak our language as well as Kelish. Let's pass through Cathal and see what we can learn."

The road to Cathal was battered and only one wagon wide, with swells of hard earth where mud had frozen during cold and rainy seasons. Enna tripped often, and cursed each time she tripped, until Dasha said, "Enna, you might watch your language."

Enna grimaced. "I was. You should hear my thoughts."

Cathal lay on the base of a gentle hill bright with yellow-green grass. Rin could count thirty wattle-and-daub houses. The older homes near the road were stone with thatched roofs that might keep out the rain of spring but not the cold of winter. But it was a summer night, warm as a breath on the cheek, and the fields were full of the slow movements of cattle. It was much simpler than the Bayern towns Rin had seen, with no visible inn or market, no lord's house, no wall or town center or row of shops. But it seemed lovely to Rin's eyes, surrounded by the hope of healthy animals and meat for winter. To build so many houses so near together seemed like an amiable thing to Rin, people who chose to live close as if they really did enjoy the company. So Rin was shocked when she was near enough to see their faces—depressed, full of gloom and heartache.

"What's the plan, Isi?" Enna asked in a whisper. "Doesn't seem likely we'll find an inn hidden in this stack of shacks."

"I don't dare sleep here and make it a target for fire-speakers anyway," Isi said. "But I'm hoping we can stop for dinner and learn what ever we can about this queen of Kel. It's Kelish custom to offer hospitality to travelers by placing a lighted candle in the window."

Dasha nodded. "Inns are rare in Kel, even in the cities. They consider it good luck to house travelers." Her eyes scanned the town's windows, shutters open to the humid night, windowsills lightless. "But perhaps not in Cathal . . ."

On they walked, no candles in sight. The villagers' eyes flicked over the girls, taking note of their Bayern tunics, skirts, and leggings. The Kelish men wore long tunics in white, gray, or yellow, with sleeves that dangled from their forearms down to their knees. The women wore the same tunics with dangling sleeves, and over the tunics, sleeveless dresses laced at the bodice. Both men and women sported caps with thick bands across the top of their head, the women's hats rounded in back, holding their hair in a sack at their necks.

"See the ladies' hats?" Dasha whispered to Rin, smiling as if nothing was wrong in all the world. "Didn't I tell you they were darling?"

An older woman swept out her little house, gray hair tucked into a yellow cap. She had a square face and a build that must have been daunting before age sloped her back. A man sat in a chair beside the door, sword strapped to his side, smoking a pipe into the summer evening. He coughed, but not from the pipe. Behind his back, the woman was deliberately sweeping dust in his direction, gusts of debris swirling up into his face. There was an honest look to the woman's face, besides the glee she seemed to take at the man's hacking. The man, on the other hand, had an expression of . . . Rin could not name it, but she was certain he deserved worse than a lungful of floor dirt.

So when Isi said, "Rin, keep an eye out for anyone who seems a trustworthy soul," Rin gestured to the sweeping woman.

"She might tell us the truth."

Isi asked the woman a question in a language Rin did not understand, though the sounds of it pleased her. The woman glared at the back of the man's head before going inside her home and sticking a lighted candle on the windowsill. The man sprang to his feet and shouted at the woman, and the woman shouted back until he stalked off.

Isi spoke again in concerned tones, and the woman waved her hand dismissively.

"I know of the western tongue," said the woman, her accent pinched and sweet, as if she spoke with her mouth squeezed together. "You are Bayern?"

Isi nodded. "We are. We don't want to cause you trouble."

"I am ready with the trouble." The woman shook her broom in the air. "If someone was not coming now, I was for hitting him already." She smiled to show she was teasing, though Rin could see she almost meant her words.

She gestured the travelers inside, where the smell of bread drenched the air. Rin spied the lumps of new loaves covered by a cloth, and her stomach gurgled, reminding her how many days it had been since she'd eaten bread. That was the smell of home, and her ma, and the warm cottage when rainstorms seethed outside. It was a hard, hard thing to lose a home full of bread and Ma.

"I have dinner. You are hungry?" The woman sat the four girls on various stools and perches around her one-roomed home, handing out carved wooden bowls heaped with well-cooked beans and meat. The food was thick and well salted, but Rin's attention kept straying to the bread.

Isi introduced them all and explained they were travelers with business in Kel. "Mistress . . ."

"Mistress Mor," said the woman.

"Mistress Mor, if I may ask, who was that man? Your son?"

Mistress Mor cackled, and Rin could not help smiling at the lively sound. "Not my son! My son is skinny and nice. That was"—she leaned out the door to spit—"soldier. How you say, soldier for no loyalty, soldier is paid?"

"Mercenary," said Dasha.

Mistress Mor nodded. "Like ants they are crawling all in houses. We are ordered for putting them in homes and giving them to eat. And they are no nice boys."

"King Scandlan ordered you to take in mercenaries?" Dasha asked.

"Maybe he. The order coming from Castle Daire. Daire is home to Lord Forannan and Lady Giles, but lord and lady now are gone. They were for being good to us. Now Castle Daire is home of queen."

There was a shout in Kelish, and they all stood, Dasha dropping her bowl in alarm. The soldier had returned with another, this one wearing a chain-mail vest and iron helmet. He pointed at Mistress Mor when he spoke. She met him at the threshold and spoke back, her voice taut and angry.

"What'll it be, Isi," Enna asked, glancing at Dasha. "Diplomacy or action?"

Isi stood between Mistress Mor and the soldier, placing a gentle hand on the soldier's chest, and spoke in Kelish.

The new soldier spoke back, and now the language did not seem so sweet to Rin. His eyes roved over the girls, taking in their clothes.

"You do not belong here," he said in a hard accent.

Isi, still calm, said, "Neither do you."

The soldier shoved Isi aside and threw a chair at Mistress Mor. She cried out as the chair struck her. Before she'd even fallen to the ground, his sword flamed red hot, and he screamed as he dropped it.

Rin rushed to Mistress Mor's side. The old woman clutched at her ankle, muttering something in Kelish.

The soldier yelled, and more soldiers came. But the villagers were gathering too, in the square opposite Mistress Mor's house.

"Rin, stay with her," Isi said, pulling Dasha and Enna out into the road.

Villagers with their draping sleeves hefted rakes and shovels, brooms and sticks. Soldiers in leather or chain-mail vests eyed the villagers. The soldier who lost his sword was still hollering in Kelish, pointing at Mistress Mor's house. The three girls stood like guards before her threshold.

"You're hurt?" Rin asked.

Mistress Mor winced, shaking her head. "Just . . . the ankle. Just the ankle." Then she said something in Kelish. Rin felt pretty certain it was a curse. She helped Mistress Mor to her feet, supporting her as the woman hopped back into the house and lay on her bed. Rin placed a rolled-up blanket under her calf to support the leg.

The noise outside continued. Rin's middle felt like a winter pond. Isi had told her to stay back. It was exhausting, this wishing to be Isi but being trapped in useless Rin.

A sudden shout made her run to the door. Perhaps two dozen mercenaries stood facing the girls, their swords waving. The villagers huddled together, some yelling back.

"Tell me what happens," said Mistress Mor from the bed.

With anxiety clawing at her chest, Rin could barely think, let alone speak. She took a deep breath. "The mercenaries and villagers are shouting at one another. But my friends will take care of it. Don't worry."

Rin worried.

"How many soldiers? How many you seeing?"

Rin counted. "Twenty-one."

The old woman shook her head. "There are more in Cathal, and they are not for liking this."

A cry pierced the silence, as fierce and desperate as a starving crow. Enna's eyes flashed toward the far side of the village. Rin could hear her say, "Isi, there's fire."

Enna ran off, leaving Dasha with Isi. When the mercenaries moved forward, the ground under their boots was suddenly muddy. Wind raged around them, the mud slippery beneath their feet. When they fell down, the hilts of their swords burning, Isi and Dasha ran after Enna.

Rin crossed the room to peer through a shutter on the back wall. She could see smoke and hear shouts and the sounds of metal striking metal.

Here I am, she thought, *watching again.*

A sensation like a dark sludge pouring moved inside her and made her want to be sick.

Rin sat beside Mistress Mor on a low stool. She stared at a chip in the daub and listened to the cries, running, curses, and sometimes gaps of silence. One altercation seemed to be nearby—a woman's voice shouting, a man's voice answering, a strike like wood on metal, and a scream. High and soft, the call of a small child. Then silence. Rin's blood chilled.

Someone began speaking in a whisper so stiff and urgent it quivered like a tent rope. It was a woman's voice. Rin looked at Mistress Mor. Her face was white with pain.

"Did you hear that?" Rin asked.

Mistress Mor nodded. "My neighbor, Aileann, I think. She is saying, 'Please, please.' Aileann has little girl."

Rin half-stood, hesitated. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes, yes, I am fine enough. You are going. Go."

Rin nodded and fled through the door. She followed the sound, sidling between two houses and stopping in a shadow.

There was a wild-haired woman facedown on the ground, one hand pressed palm to dirt, the other reached out and up, pleading toward a mercenary. Her face was streaked with dirt, clean lines where tears ran, and a bruise was swelling the side of her face. Beside her lay the pieces of a shovel, its wooden shaft broken in two. The mercenary was short and thick like a big toe, his wide nose wrinkled in a sneer, and his eyes were crazed. His arm squeezed the neck of a child of about four years. She squirmed and cried, flinching away from the short sword he held across her belly.

The mercenary's eyes flashed, half-mad with fierce amusement, and the way he spoke to Aileann, Rin guessed he knew her well, perhaps had been housed with her. The little girl was surely Aileann's daughter—they had the same stormy hair that stuck up and around, half-covering her face. Rin

could not see the girl's eyes, but she could see the worried mouth, the chin that trembled.

Aileann repeated that same word over and over, *please, please, please.* It seemed to be all she could say between terrified sobs.

That little girl. She was about the same age as Rin's niece Genna, she had the same hair color as her nephew Incher, the same round, simple face as Tusken. Little Tusken. No one should hurt a child. And yet there was someone with a sword, someone who did not care about another's pain, someone who might kill. Rin looked around, desperate for help, but the girls were nowhere near.

Ma would never allow a bully like that mercenary to hurt a child. But she was so far away, Rin could not think what her mother would do. Isi would use her fire to burn the sword out of his hand and the wind to blow him off. Rin held no weapon. All she could do was speak. The idea sent waves of nausea pulsing through her, but there was no time to worry.

Rin stepped out of the shadow and into moonlight. The mercenary's eyes found her at once.

He began to speak in Kelish, but Rin interrupted.

"Do you understand me?" He did not answer, but she could see he did. "Please don't hurt the girl. Listen to me first." Her teeth were chattering, she was so angry and so scared, and so unsure what to say. Since the age of seven, she'd trained herself never to tell anyone what to do. Doing it on purpose felt like trying to forget how to walk.

"If you hurt her, you'll regret it powerfully, you'll wish you'd just slit your own throat. So don't. Just don't."

His eyes were wild, open and darting from Rin to Aileann to the houses around them. His sword trembled. "Are you to stop me? Ha!"

The little girl moaned, soft and tired now, as if she had no more voice to cry. Her mother wailed with new terror, her hand still reaching in hopeless desperation.

"Shh," Rin hissed at her. The man was so twitchy, she was afraid a loud noise could set him off. Anger boiled her bones and made her feel hot and dangerous, though her teeth were chattering so hard now that her slamming jaw shook her vision.

She studied his face, remembered the way he had looked at the little girl, as if she were a mangy cat, barely worth notice and good for nothing but casting aside.

Rin moved toward him, as slow as a shadow inching with the sun. She opened her hands, showing she had no weapon.

"I can't hurt you," she said.

"You are for hurting me?" His voice boiled. "She was putting milk in my boots this morning. She is trouble every day I am on this village. She is no girl, she is demon. You keep closer and I am eating her for supper!"

"Not yet," Rin said, her voice shaking, her throat nearly closing off. But somehow the words vibrated with ease and confidence. "First I want to tell you a story. About her. About the little girl. She loves to run so fast she imagines her hair turns into wind. And she loves to climb trees and eat pine nuts out of the cones. When she's six years, and ten, and twelve, sometimes her mother will let her curl up on her lap like she still does now, and they'll rock by the fire, humming together. She loves her ma so much."

Rin meant to attack him with words, challenge and demand and tear away his confidence, as she had with . . . A memory flashed behind her eyes of the night with Wilem, the things she'd said. She clamped it down. *Never mind that. Never mind*. But attacking did not seem right for the mercenary—attacks could anger him and get the girl hurt. Calming is what he needed. She wished she could make him feel what she used to feel when at home with her aspens.

"She has older brothers, but her ma loves her best. Loves her like her own self. When she gets older, she'll worry that her ma loves a stranger." Rin swallowed, but her tongue was dry as bark. She kept her eyes on the little girl and forced more words out. "When she's fifteen she'll go on a journey, because home just won't feel right anymore. The journey will be hard, and scary, but she'll meet people who are like her and can help. She'll worry sometimes about her ma, worry that she won't ever get to go home and that will break her ma's heart. But in the end, she'll change, like an apple gets rosy in the sun, and she'll go home again, and this time it will *feel* like home. This time she'll stay forever, and her ma will be so happy."

The mercenary was frowning. The sword in his hand lowered, just an inch. Rin kept talking.

"Someday when she's grown with children of her own, she'll still love to run so fast she'll think her hair is turning into wind, and she'll still climb trees as long as her knees can bend. And her whole life will be long and good too, because you let her live. Because of you."

While Rin spoke, she kept moving forward, very slowly, and the armed man's feral eyes stayed on her. The girl still hung from his arm, tears leaving streaks on her dirty cheeks, just like her mother's. Aileann had not moved, though she gasped and sobbed with her mouth open.

The man seemed confused. He looked at the girl again, as if he did not know what kind of beast she was after all.

"How . . . how you are knowing?" He sounded as though he believed Rin, every word.

"I *know*," said Rin, then she was close enough to touch him. Her hand reached out, but her eyes strayed to his blade, held there inches away, sharp enough to swipe through her wrist in one stroke. She trembled all over. "She needs to keep on going. She's got running to do and a boy to meet someday, and children waiting to be born. You should let her go run so fast her hair can turn into wind. Let her go. Fast as wind."

Twice Rin hesitated, but finally she placed her hand on the man's arm. She used to soak in the calm of the trees when she was touching their bark, breathing in the exhale of their leaves—perhaps she could offer this mercenary some calm in her touch. Perhaps she could be his tree.

"Nothing wrong in all the world," Rin said softly. "No need to make a fuss. Let her go running, let her grow up to be a ma—a ma like your own, who cuddled you close and kissed you fast. No fuss at all."

His eyebrows furrowed, and he looked at the girl, then down at her mother.

Please, the mother said once, her voice exhausted and final.

The mercenary let go.

The little girl yelped as he dropped her. She scrambled into her mother's arms, and they sat on the ground, gripping each other and sobbing, their eyes shut.

Rin began to back away very slowly, not wanting that mercenary's attention to return to her, not with that sword in his hand. He was staring at the child and shaking his head.

Another mercenary ran past, heading north of town. He saw his companion and stopped, asking him a question in Kelish.

The squat mercenary looked at his friend, half-dazed. "I was . . ." Then he pointed at Rin and spoke in Kelish, sounding confused and half-asleep.

The new mercenary growled. He came at Rin so quickly that she spooked and fell backward, striking her head on the ground, the sweep of his sword

cutting the air just above her. Her tongue was salted with the taste of blood. Dizzy, she searched for sight of the mercenary's sword—there above her. He was swinging for another strike. She covered her head with her arms.

Sorry, Ma, she thought. *Sorry, Razo. And Wilem too. Sorry.*

Chapter 13

Rin hid her face, her whole body tense as she waited for the sword to slice her. But nothing happened. She heard a gurgle and peeked. The mercenary's face was red, and he dropped his sword, his hands flying to his neck. The gurgle was coming from his throat. He fell to his knees, tearing at his shirt, slapping at his lips. When he leaned over, water poured from his mouth, but still he choked, scratching at the earth and coughing. His wet hand reached for Rin, and she scuttled back on her hands and feet.

"Go away!" Rin pleaded. "Go away!"

The squat mercenary grabbed his comrade around the shoulders and ran away. Rin could hear the man heave the last of the water from his lungs, gasp and breathe at last. But they did not stop running.

Aileann and her child had fled too. Footsteps hurried toward her from behind, but she did not flinch, guessing who it was.

"Are you all right, Rinna?" asked Dasha. "Come on now, let me put my arm around you, that's right. Let's go back to Mistress Mor's, shall we?"

Rin wondered why Dasha seemed to be trembling harder than an aspen in a windstorm. After a few missed steps, Rin realized she was the one still trembling.

Inside the cottage, Isi was kneeling beside the bed, wrapping Mistress Mor's leg with strips ripped from the queen's cloak.

"Good luck for opening home to travelers," Mistress Mor was muttering. "Good luck break my bone."

"Mistress Mor—," Isi began.

"No, no, it *was* good luck. You gave us reason for ridding of pests. They come here months ago, leave sometimes, always come back and eat as if no winter comes. Sometimes slap women, sometimes push children." She sucked air in through her teeth at the pain and began speaking more quickly, adding occasional Kelish words in her haste. "I go to Castle Daire for complaining. I go with some men, but I did no trusting them to be smart, so young and stupid for carrying swords, *du konish.* Many soldiers at castle now, and they no letting us by gates. Some woman say queen in Kel orders soldiers to our town and say no for talking to us. Banner flying in castle

tower, *mom pinken*, yellow lily, banner for queen. If King Scandlan married again, he no for telling us."

"Which is strange." Isi rubbed her eyes. "Is the king even aware that a so-called queen resides at Daire and is amassing an army of mercenaries?"

"I am wanting for going to Bressal and for talking at King Scandlan. Not with this ankle now, *limish tom, lim fartik* . . ."

Enna came through the door, wafting a strong whiff of smoke—some wood smoke and some not, announcing other things had burned. It was not a comfortable scent.

"All's quiet, and the fields are full of fleeing villains," Enna said, dropping onto a stool. "The cowards. They love a midnight attack when there's no one to fight back, but one little push and they run away. They make me want to spit in their eyeballs."

"And the villagers—," Isi began.

"None dead," said Enna. "But not for lack of trying. Those goat-faced pigs went crazy as soon as the villagers started fighting back. This would've been a slaughter house. I saw women setting up house for those whose roofs were burned through. I think they'll be all right, Isi, if you're thinking we should scurry after a certain queen."

"That's where the mercenaries are headed. We'd be wise to go on, finish this before she can send more soldiers in retribution."

Mistress Mor eyed the girls. "You are . . . *yunik fam* . . . how do you say?"

Isi smiled. "Odd?"

Mistress Mor nodded. "Odd, yes. And dangerous too." She laughed with her head back, and seemed pleased to do so. "My son will come soon for seeing me. You go."

They were at the door when the woman gestured to the table where the loaves of bread sat under a white cloth. "And one bread for taking, please."

All four girls sighed with relieved delight, then giggled at their joint sigh.

"I would politely decline," said Dasha, "if that amazing smell hadn't been teasing me to near insanity."

They thanked Mistress Mor, Isi placing something in her palm that most likely was round and gold. Then they jogged to the edge of the village, each tearing into a chunk of the bread. The crust was crisp and thin, the inside nutty and dark, and Rin could not remember ever enjoying food so much. It smelled like home, but it tasted different—new and strange and full of hope.

She let the first bite mellow on her tongue, let the softness dissolve until the flavor changed.

"Enna, did you find any signs of horses we might buy?" Isi asked.

"There weren't many to begin with, and the cowards took those as they fled."

Dasha sighed. "It will be a long walk to Daire."

Rin was secretly relieved. She felt tilted and quavery from her encounter with the mercenary, and she wanted to feel herself moving, use her walking muscles, not clutch to the saddle of an uncertain beast.

Enna began to trudge northeast. "There weren't any fire-speakers in the village to night, near as I could tell. Those fires were started by cowards with torches, punishing the villagers for fighting back. Filthy-fingered, litter-born, rancid—"

"I can't fathom what is happening," said Isi. "A queen in Kel, a secret queen, who attacks Geric, attacks us, houses mercenaries on the border with Bayern. What ever the reason, we have to stop her—or whoever is behind these attacks."

"We are in Kel now," said Dasha. "Shouldn't this be King Scandlan's matter?"

"When fire-speakers burn houses and attack people, that's my matter," Enna said. "And if the burners are hiding behind a queen in Kel, that's where I'll go."

"You're right, Dasha," said Isi. "We're stepping into dangerous diplomatic territory. But our ambassador in Kel was dismissed, and Scandlan has been unresponsive. If we go to Bressal first, it could take weeks to find safe paths through the bogs of Kel. We need to act quickly before more people are hurt."

"Still," said Dasha, "this seems risky."

Isi nodded, her eyes sad. "But I think it's a risk I need to take. Dasha, if you are at all concerned about being involved—"

"I am concerned," said Dasha, "but I still want to be involved. You're right that something is amiss in Kel, and by virtue of our talents, we are bound to help."

"Thank you. We'll need to get inside the castle and take down the fire-speakers as quickly as possible. Wind can push back fire attacks, but with your water, Dasha, you might be able to stop them cold."

"I am ready."

“Good,” Isi said. “I want to lock up whoever is behind this for Scandlan to judge. Let’s always keep in mind that we’re in Kel, and if we trip up, Scandlan might feel it his duty to declare war on Bayern. Especially if this person really is his wife and the rightful queen. So we tread carefully.”

“Carefully,” said Enna, her eyes focused on the way before them. “We can do that. Absolutely. And then we’ll do what ever it takes.”

“Carefully,” Isi warned.

“Right.” When Enna spoke again, her voice was so soft, Rin had to strain to hear. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. I swore I never would again. But you should know, I will if I need to, Isi. If I need to keep Bayern’s queen safe, I will kill.”

Rin could see Isi’s profile as she looked at Enna, lines of sadness in her face, torment almost, and Rin expected the queen to declare that Enna need never go back on her promise. But then Isi raised one eyebrow.

“As if you could.”

Enna stared at Isi so intently she tripped over a rock. “Excuse me?”

“You talk so big, *I’ll kill if I have to*, but you couldn’t even kill me.”

Rin and Dasha gaped. Enna sighed and waved a hand as if trying to sum up a lot of information quickly. “One time I tried to kill her and I failed. It wasn’t . . . I didn’t mean . . . it was a long . . . well, anyway, after that, there was nowhere for our friendship to go but up.”

“I can depend on Enna for just about anything,” said Isi, “but I could never make her a court assassin. She’d fall flat on her face.”

“Ho there now, my queen, I can slay with the best of them. If you just weren’t so good at defending yourself—”

“No excuses. You can set fire to an army, but when it comes down to it, you’re really bad at individual murders.”

“Fine.”

Rin watched Isi closely. There was a tightness in her voice, a sadness in her eyes. Despite the teasing, the queen cared very much whether her friend killed again.

Isi did not just like Enna, Rin considered. She needed her, and not just for Enna’s talents, her protection and power. The queen needed to hear a second voice, to have someone she trusted always on her side. Rin thought of her own mother, surrounded by people, all family and no friends. The homestead was frantic with people, but they were all people Ma fussed and sweated and cared for. Who cared for Ma?

“If it’s possible that this queen of Kel has been trying to herd us to Castle Daire, then why are we . . .” Dasha gestured with her chin toward the direction they walked.

“I know,” said Isi. “It’s an uncertain road. But I can’t imagine she could kill or even capture us. Enna alone can hold off an entire battalion of soldiers or a handful of fire-speakers.” She hooked arms with Enna at her side, and Dasha put her arm through Rin’s. “This queen of Kel thinks she can defeat us? Ruffle our feathers? Make us flinch? Ha, I say.”

“Ha!” Enna echoed with enthusiasm.

A loud, contented *moo* echoed Enna’s laugh, startling Dasha to scream. Rin realized they were walking through a herd of cows sampling the damp grasses of the night field.

Recovered, Dasha held up her head as she tromped on. “That’s right. Ha to that burning queen, and *moo* too. There’s a good deal of water hanging in those clouds up there that is eager to meet her fire-speakers.”

Rin put her arm more firmly through Dasha’s, breathing in the good feeling of being with friends. And not just any friends. Joined with those three girls, she felt as insurmountable as a mountain, as solid as a forest of trees. It made her feel bold, almost as good as them, almost as strong.

“Have you been to Daire before, Isi?” Dasha asked.

“No, I believe both the castle and its town are small. Last year Geric and I traveled to the coast and took the sea route to Bressal to meet with the king. Scandlan was reserved but gracious, so his current silence troubles me. We stayed a couple of weeks, taking Tusken with us. He loved the sword dancing and drumming. Geric loved the roast boar and fishing with nets in the ocean. I loved the tales.”

“You’ve never told me any Kelish tales,” Enna said.

“Haven’t I? They’re . . . strange, in a wonderful way, but they don’t make good bed tales. I’ve wondered why the Kelish stories are about humanlike animals, as if in order to see the story it has to be a bit removed from what is actually real.”

“So go on, then,” said Enna.

“All right. So. The boar, the stag, and the eagle met on the last craggy peak of the world, looked down, and sighed at what they saw. The boar was a king, and he said, ‘There are not enough people.’ The stag was a poet, and he said, ‘There is not enough beauty.’ The eagle was a cleric, and he said, ‘There is not enough mystery.’ Then the wolf, arriving late, looked up

instead of down and said, ‘There is not enough hunger,’ and promptly ate them all.” Isi cleared her throat. “And . . . that’s the end.”

“Oh,” Dasha said. “I see.”

Isi laughed. “The Kelish enjoy the unexpected endings, especially ones that involve death. All Kelish tales are questions, and this one asks, if the boar was king, the stag was poet, and the eagle was cleric, then what was the wolf?”

“A woman,” said Enna.

“Unkindness,” said Dasha. “Brutality, selfishness, people who play life like a game and kill to win. What do you think, Isi?”

“King, poet, and cleric are all professions, so maybe the wolf represents a profession as well, like a warrior. Or perhaps it’s something less tangible, like . . . time.” Isi shrugged. “It seems like a riddle, but then I think, maybe there isn’t one answer. What do you think, Rin?”

Rin still had not said a word since yelling at the mercenaries to go away. She cleared her throat and was about to agree with what Isi had said, but a different thought seized her. “Maybe the wolf isn’t a person or a thing. Maybe it’s something inside—inside us.” She imagined the wolf poised in her own chest with maw open at her heart, a beast that could eat her from the inside. The girls did not answer, and Rin cursed herself for speaking her thoughts.

“Huh,” said Dasha. “Well, I like the tale. It is sort of dreadful, but so is this night, and the distraction is constructive.”

So Isi told another, and another, as they walked forward and up in the night of a hidden moon. Rin listened but only barely, because she kept asking herself, *What is the wolf?*

A solitary tree lurked on a hilltop, its branches reaching high and wide. It was a perfect outline against the starlit sky, perhaps the loveliest tree shape Rin had ever seen, and it filled her with wonder for the beauty in the world, even here, so far from home that people spoke a new language and told animal tales that asked questions more confusing than dreams. It was not until they passed beneath it that Rin realized the enormity of the thing, and she held her breath in awe. She was reminded of the ancient elm in the palace yard, and marveled again at what a tree could become outside a forest. Isi, Dasha, and Enna had all left home and family, and they were doing fine. Rin had hoped that she too could bloom away from home, but

passing beneath that tree, under a foreign night sky, she felt even tinier than before, a mote of dust that could be lost in the merest huff of wind.

On they marched, the hour moving through them and past them so quickly, Rin was not tired by the time they reached Daire. They halted at first sight of the castle, in a rocky field dotted with trees. The wind troubled the leaves and stirred them into a fluster, chattering and nipping at each other like kits. The moon revealed itself, leering over the castle battlement. In its shadow, the queen of Kel was waiting.

Part Three



The Castle

Chapter 14

The moon lit the castle from behind, scratching its jagged outline across a blue-black sky. Much smaller than the palace in Bayern's capital, this border fortress was built of connected towers with toothy tops. Rin could hear the occasional bawl of cattle, for Kel was as seemingly full of cows as the Forest was of squirrels. It was a comforting sound, a reminder that there were creatures who did not know about crossbow bolts and fire-speakers, and were just happy to smell late-summer grass.

Just beyond the field, Rin felt the pull of trees. A wood. A place to hide. She began to veer that way, hating the open plain where anyone might spot them by the garish light of that white moon.

Dasha's arm was still in hers, so Rin pulled the Tiran girl along.

"This does seem too open, doesn't it, Isi?" said Dasha.

Ahead stood three dark figures. Rin startled and Dasha made a dry scream. How had Isi's wind not given warning? Then Rin noticed their huge height, their stillness. Three pillars of stacked stones, standing three men high, side by side as if guarding the wood.

"They're cairns," said Isi. "Built both to honor the gods in the wood and to keep them there."

"Why?" asked Enna.

"Gods in the wood are good luck. Gods roaming free get involved in people's lives."

Rin could tell from Isi's voice that she did not believe in sacred cairns or gods in the wood, but as they passed by the third pillar, Enna's face was full of curiosity and reverence. Rin herself felt something peculiar just seeing the cairns, as if she were looking at the body of someone she used to know.

"I think the cairns are the way of the clerics and the people to say, we know there is something more, but we don't know what," Isi went on. "So we give it shape, and that shape may be the wrong shape, but it's there to remind us of what we can't see. The wrongness of it is what makes us think. The error in what we made will bring us the truth."

"That makes me think of the sea . . ." Dasha sighed, a sound of longing. "We see the surface, blue or silver or gray, and waves hitting the shore. But

we know there's so much we can't see, so what we love about it becomes in part what we imagine it is hiding."

Isi stopped. The other girls halted just as suddenly, waiting for what ever news Isi heard on the wind. Isi began to turn, looking for a source.

"They're staying downwind, but I got a glimpse. Armed men. Over . . ." She pointed vaguely to her right, then behind them. Enna's hands were in fists.

"The wood," Rin urged. She used to love night, when the worst thing hiding in the darkness was one of her brothers tiptoeing to pull a prank. Now night was full of burners and swords and bolts, and Rin's skin ached for trees to shield her. Enna and Isi turned as they walked, scanning the darkness.

"They could pick us off with arrows," Dasha said, her voice trembling.

Isi shook her head. "No, they're too far behind us. Enna, do you hear anything?"

"Wait." Enna stopped. "They're ahead of us, too."

All stopped. Enna and Isi were listening—not with their ears, Rin knew, but in some other way, sensing wind and heat. The lurkers must have been close, because Isi or Enna pulled a wind to circle around the four girls. Rin hoped it was thick enough to toss away arrows and protect them from fire.

A moment later, a group of soldiers came running from the wood, swords raised.

"Enna, heat their weapons out of their hands," said Isi. "I'll take their breaths. Dasha, can you sink them where they stand?"

Dasha nodded.

"I'm going to release the wind now."

The circling wind died, and Rin could feel light vibrations of wind and heat; then the soldiers were dropping swords and gasping as if the air had been pulled right out of their lungs. While they gasped and stumbled, the ground beneath their feet was getting wetter, deep ground water rising up through the dirt and soaking it through, mud as deep as their knees seizing the soldiers' boots and holding them fast. When the breeze stilled and the men could breathe again, they found themselves stuck in mud, unable to take a step.

"None of them are fire-speakers," Enna said, apparently able to tell from a distance.

“Who sent you?” Isi’s voice was hard. “Tell us now or worse things will happen than muddy boots. Who ordered your attack?”

Isi repeated her demand in Kelish, but they did not answer. Perhaps the soldiers guessed that it was an idle threat, or perhaps the threats of their own leader were more dire.

“Isi,” Dasha said. “It seems likely that whoever burned the inn would know we could handle this many soldiers.”

Isi looked toward the castle. “She’s planning something.”

Enna turned her back to Isi, facing the other direction, and Dasha the same, the fire sisters forming a triangle, scanning the horizon for coming danger.

“Rin, take cover,” Isi said.

Rin wanted to stay. She did not feel in danger with those girls—stepping away from them and into the darkness, that seemed riskier. So she did not go far, just a couple dozen steps to the nearest cairn, putting the massive stack of stones between herself and the castle. Her boots were coated with Dasha’s mud, and she scraped them off with a rock.

“Maybe we should—,” Enna started.

A bonfire of wood blazed so suddenly, Rin had no doubt a fire-speaker had done the job. She peered around the edge of the stones. There, where the outer wall of Castle Daire touched the wood, a fire burned beneath a massive tree. A metal cage dangled from a branch, high enough that the flames did not touch it. But if the cage slipped, it would fall directly into the fire.

Two people were in the cage. A boy holding a child. And Rin knew them. She knew the shape of them, the size of them. She wished she was mistaken, wished so hard her head ached.

“Who . . . ,” Dasha began to ask.

“No,” Isi breathed. “No. No. No.”

Isi knew. And so, with a sickening drop of her stomach, Rin was certain too—the boy in the cage was Razo, and the child was Tusken.

Isi took one step forward and the bonfire died. Wind whipped up, knocking down anyone standing between Isi and the cage. Rin half-expected the entire castle to explode in flame, but before Isi could do anything more, a voice cut through the wind and night. A woman’s voice, her accent neither Kelish nor Bayern. A pleasing voice.

“Now please stay calm. There’s no cause for an ado. All will be well. I will not hurt you. It would benefit everyone if you would listen for a moment. I know you are curious to understand why you are here. You want to end this peacefully, so it is wise to listen before you strike.”

Out of the shadows, a slim figure walked forward. Her face was not yet visible, but Isi gasped.

“Get away, all of you,” Isi commanded. “Enna, Dasha, go. Go now!”

“No, don’t, please. It would be better if you stayed.”

And they stayed. Rin felt turned to wood. More than anything, she wanted to hear that voice again. And the figure kept advancing. She moved in such a way that Rin was sure she was aware of her hips and liked them a great deal. Her robes were made of a loose pink fabric that clung to her curvier parts. Her pale hair, silvery in the night, hung loose over her shoulders, and made her appear tall, lean, almost luminous. In all, she seemed the most beautiful creature alive. It was easy to watch her and forget about Razo and Tusken in the cage.

Do something quick, Rin thought, though she did not move. Neither did the fire sisters. Dasha’s expression was curious, Enna’s was rigid as if she were in great pain. Isi’s was stiff with horror.

Isi spoke one word. “Selia.”

Chapter 15

Here I am!" said the woman, lifting a hand as if to present herself. The bonfire blazed anew, and Selia was lit from behind in orange and gold, as grand and unearthly as the stone pillars, but sinuous as a snake.

She kept moving forward. "And overjoyed to see you. Truly. I've been simply breathless to—Now, Enna, be calm. Terrible things will happen if you burn me. Terrible things. I think you believe me, don't you? Yes, you do, poor thing. I am awfully convincing. There is really no choice but for you to listen. Calmly, politely. Unclench those fists there, Crown Princess." She'd reached Isi, and she picked up Isi's fist and smoothed her hand straight. There was no hesitation in her fluid motions, no fear in her face. "That's better. As I was saying, I am completely overjoyed to welcome you to my kingdom. You are the honey cake for my feast. And I cannot wait to eat you up. Easy now, Anidori. Just stand there, harmless please. If you hurt me, your son loses his head at once."

Rin glanced around, trying to find some evidence that this claim was true. How could it be? Tusken was in that cage, and she had seen what these fire sisters could do. In moments, surely they could take out all the soldiers, and this Selia too, before anyone got close enough to pluck a hair from Tusken's or Razo's head. Did the girls believe Selia's threat? Why did they not act? *Now, hurry, now.* And yet . . . why did Rin stand still as well? Just listening to Selia's voice, her whole body relaxed. Not the same as when she allowed herself to feel the peace of trees—that peace came from her core and flowed out. This calm seemed to fill her head like smoke fills a room. Her body was separate from her, a different being, and her thoughts were too hazy to make it move.

Besides, why bother? Selia said there was no way to save the boys, and surely she was right. And her voice was so reassuring. The more Rin listened, the more the delicious sound of Selia's words crept inside, roosted in her like a flock of sleepy birds, happy to be home. Rin almost smiled at the thought. She liked birds. She was feeling cozy and safe, like birds at home in their trees . . .

"A word of advice? The next time you take it in your head to execute someone, dig up the courage to do it yourself. You can't trust anyone these

days, can you? It takes courage to kill, Crown Princess. Real courage. Time and again, you've proven that you don't have it." Selia put a hand under Isi's chin and whispered, "But I do." She kissed Isi on the lips, like a little girl might kiss a precious doll.

Enna hissed and fire burst at Selia's hem, making her take two steps back in surprise. But in an instant the fire was gone, as if sucked away by a fire-speaker, and Selia shook the smoke out of her skirt. She smiled tenderly at Enna. "No more of that, Enna. Be a good girl." She pressed her cheek to Enna's, whispering something in her ear. One of Enna's eyes leaked a tear, but she did not so much as push Selia back.

This is people-speaking, Rin thought. This was the curse, as Enna called it, the one gift that corrupted everyone it touched. This was more dangerous than a sword, more than wind, water, and fire. Rin was still hidden behind the cairn, and Selia had not seen her. She should do something. But she did not. Under Selia's voice, Rin felt like an ant in a flood.

"I think I will take you all back to my castle—yes, *my* castle." Selia's eyes were triumphant, hungry even, as her gaze returned to Isi. "Did you think I would never have my own?"

"Selia," Isi said, getting three slow syllables out of her name. Her breathing was heavy, she blinked slowly. "You—"

"That's enough, Crown Princess," Selia said in a voice meant to soothe. "Please don't tax yourself. You are to be my very special guests, and I want you in the best of health. We'll have a fortnight of celebrations before the big ending. Oh, the things I have planned for your amusement! Such a collection of barrels and nails and wild stallions to please a boatful of royalty! I know what fondness you have for such things, so I've spared no expense. But don't be alarmed. If you play by my rules, no one need be harmed, not even a squealing piglet."

Selia was going to take them into the castle. Into a cage. Like Tusken, like Razo. Rin took a step backward, another, but she was shaking so badly a small stumble brought her to the ground.

"It really is wonderful to see you. We haven't been alone, just to chat, in years. The last time we were in a forest and I was admiring one of your gowns, but you did not want me to touch it. Rather petulant of you, I thought at the time, but you never did know how to be royal and yet behave royally. Do not concern yourself about that now. After all, not everyone is

born with social grace, and I long ago pardoned you for your stinginess with clothing. Speaking of clothing, don't you adore this dress?"

Selia spun around, the soft pink fabric flipping up and wrapping her legs. "Imagine it without the scorch marks—that was unfortunate, but you see how forgiving I am to look past it, as I know Enna cannot truly cause me any harm. This dress is the latest Kelish fashion, but I added the lace on the sleeves myself. As soon as Scandlan and I announce our marriage and I make appearances at court, you will see all the Kelish women add lace to their sleeves. People look up to their queen—when their queen has substance to offer. That will all happen soon. My husband the king wished to announce it at once, of course, but I thought it wise to take it slowly. He is so indulgent. He loves me tirelessly. You just can't imagine how thrilled he was to make me his queen.

"Look at me! I just talk and talk when you'd think I'd be a proper hostess and take you back to my palace for refreshments in our commodious dungeon, but I see you and realize how long we have been apart. I have so much to tell you! First of all, I want you to know that the little boy is safe and healthy." She looked up at the cage, smiling distractedly. "Such a find. Such a treasure. I can't thank you enough for bringing him out of the palace yourself. Cilie just didn't know how she was going to manage kidnapping him from under your nose, even with the distraction my hearth-watchers started to get Geric out of the way. This convenience was much better.

"I'm thinking of raising him as my own. A child can be a charming accessory for any noble lady, and it will save me the trouble of having to go through the unpleasantness of bearing one myself. He already passed the bawling baby stage and is conveniently mobile, and so will do nicely."

Isi's jaw flexed, and she leaned forward as if preparing to take a step. Selia laughed, so light and fresh it was as if the moonlight sang. She rubbed a consoling hand on Isi's arm.

"There, there now, we can still talk about his fate. Nothing is decided for certain. I will appreciate your input greatly. You see, Crown Princess, how reasonable I can be when you play nice? I will save your child. I won't wring his tiny little neck and toss him to the hounds, but only so long as you don't cause any trouble. You want him safe more than anything. Oh yes, you do, I can see the power of your desire wetting your eyes and quivering your adorable little chin." Selia stroked Isi's chin with her finger. "You will do anything to protect him. No need to say it. And I *will* protect him, I

swear it. I will keep him safe as long as you and your friends are good girls."

Everything inside Rin was screaming, *No, no, no! That's Razo up there, that's Tusken. Stop listening to her. Stop!* She clung to the rocks in the cairn and tried to stand, but her legs ached with shaking, and everything seemed too hard. The effort exhausted her muscles, and Rin slumped back to the ground, the lulling of Selia's voice soothing the anger from her blood.

"It was easy to coax Tusken away from those soldiers. They were at camp. Geric was in a tent with a physician, and twenty men were guarding one little boy. He was so darling! Overjoyed to see a fair-haired lady just like his own mother. He was eager to come, and that short soldier only too happy to carry him for me. I left my men and hearth-watchers in the wood. They never had to use arrows or fire. Sweet of you to raise such a compliant child."

Rin wanted nothing more than to curl up and go to sleep. Still on the ground, she lay on her side, extending her arm to rest under her head. Her hand brushed something hard—the exposed root of a tree, arching up out of the dirt like a bent knee. *A tree.* She crawled, following the root to the tree. The cairn now completely blocked all sight of the girls and Selia.

Rin leaned against the trunk . . . *please, please* . . . aching for the escape of trees. She did not dare open herself to the tree, but her skin crawled with Selia's voice and she was desperate for relief. Just to be near the tree helped a little, just to try and remember how she used to feel inside that uncomplicated stillness. *Green and buzzing, drowsy and sweet*, she reminded herself, and she almost heard that murmur in memory. Heard it in a different way than she heard the urgent rasping of crickets spilling out of the wood or Selia's voice from the other side of the cairn. Heard it through her skin or deep in her chest.

". . . I will make sure Tusken never wants for anything . . ."

Stop, don't listen. Rin pressed herself closer but still kept herself from opening her senses to the tree. She wished she could plant her feet in soil and grow thick bark, let her arms trail through breezes and twist toward the sky. That promised safety. Trees did not care about what people said, did not understand. Just the slow throb of sap, the quiet stretch of roots, the sleepy crackle of leaves feeling a breeze . . .

Rin shut her eyes and insisted that her body relax. *Remember the rhythm of sap, leaves tasting wind, trunk a fortress of memory, bark thick, limbs*

strong . . . Selia's voice slithered back into her consciousness.

"I really hated it when the king of Bayern died and you became a queen before I could."

Rin put her hands over her ears, but it did not matter. Even blocking out the sound of Selia's voice, the feeling of the words continued to roll around in her mind until Rin yearned to hear them again. Her hands dropped.

"But one can't rush into things—no, plans must be carefully laid, and sometimes that takes years. Oh, we have so much catching up to do! Or at least I do. Why am I always catching up to you, when I can run faster and think faster? Do you know? It is irritating. Still, I will always be sure that . . ."

No.

". . . and Tusken will be as happy as an otter in . . ."

No.

". . . his very life depends on . . ."

No! Stop listening to her. Remember the trees. Relax. Rin breathed, filling her lungs, her center. *I am nothing. I am part of the scenery, a fallen leaf, a scrap of bark. No danger, no time, no rush.*

Her trembling slowed, and her thoughts cleared as if the wind had swept fallen leaves from her mind. Before she could lose the stillness, Rin gripped her hands into fists and left the shelter of the cairn.

The first few steps were the worst. If anyone looked her direction, they would see a girl moving toward the wood. So she went slowly, no motion worth drawing notice, no sound to provoke a turn of head.

When hunting, silence was essential. But sneaking past people required seeming casualness as well. No exaggerated tiptoeing or fleeing from tree to tree. Back home, no one bothered to look at Rin much, and she was practiced at keeping quiet. She could stroll behind one of her brothers and lift the meat out of the sandwich in his hand without drawing attention. That trick always made Razo laugh.

Razo. The thought of her brother kept her moving through the night, slow but per sis tent, and she was reminded of a root, seemingly still yet always digging, always moving. She entered the deeper wood in order to skirt Selia and her guards, then swing back to the cage. Keeping one hand up, she touched trees in passing, just to remind her of the steady peace she was trying to maintain, the voice of trees flowing through her, the drowsy hum of sap and water, the wistful murmur of leaves on wind.

The green world, she named that place where she could hear trees. It had been like a second surface to everything, a soft barrier she could lean through. When completely submerged in green, she was immobile. But if she could barely touch it, lean half in and half out, perhaps she could gain some of that clarity and slowness and still keep moving forward.

This was not like sneaking with Razo. She quivered with the strange and yet familiar impression that she was different somehow. Air filled her in a new way, thick and cool and fluid, like water filled a fish.

Wonder at what she was doing was distracting. She pushed aside her thoughts, focusing on balancing herself in that place where Selia's voice did not matter, where panic could not turn her into a useless, quivering animal. She forced herself to relax in order to maintain the nearness of the green world, physically trembling with the effort. What she tried seemed impossible—struggling to slow, fighting to be calm, laboring for rest. She might as well scream for quiet. As she thought it, she realized how absurd it really was, and in that moment the stillness crumbled. There was no calm, no control. Selia's voice slammed back into her head.

". . . could just chat with you all night it seems! I have a particular fondness for words. I suppose you know that, Crown Princess. This has been a true joy, but the night grows chill and we should retire indoors."

Rin was alone in a foreign wood, vulnerable, confused, anxious to run away but stuck to the spot with fear. Her heart pounded as if it wanted to escape from her chest, her vision wavered, her whole self seemed to be thudding away with the heartbeats, and she gasped just to breathe.

"Stop it," she told herself in a haggard whisper. "Stop. Be like Isi, like Razo. Fearless and just fine. Do it."

She rested against a tree, still not daring to actually listen, sweating as she fought for the courage to be calm. The greenness seemed closer, so she shut her eyes and bid herself slip toward it, almost hearing the tree's low rumbles, almost tasting that tranquility. When she was no longer aware of Selia's voice in the distance, she walked on.

Though she moved as slowly and casually as a deer nosing for greens, the effort made her muscles warm. Razo and Tusken were in a cage, Isi and the others trapped by that voice, and if the soldiers noticed Rin they would kill her and Razo and Tusken too because Selia had said she would kill them if the girls did not do as she said and stay still and . . .

No. Think about Razo. This was just a game. She was playing stealth. She'd stolen Jef's sandwich and was sneaking away, that was all. To go laugh with Razo. She could do this.

She was just a tree.

It seemed she would never reach the spot, then suddenly she was there. An oak tree, large, ponderous. The cage was lashed with ropes to one of its thick base limbs, hanging above the lapping fire. Selia was heading back to the castle. Isi, Enna, and Dasha were following, flanked on all sides by soldiers. The fire sisters were not bound. They would go willingly or not at all.

Most of the soldiers were moving toward the castle. Even those stuck to their knees in mud had managed to dig themselves out. Only about ten remained. They would return their attention to the cage and take Razo and Tusken back to the castle too. Rin did not have much time.

She pulled a knife from the pack on her back and gripped its blade with her teeth while she climbed. She lay flat on the branch holding the cage and pulled herself closer. Razo was watching, eyes unblinking, terrified and hopeful too. Tusken was asleep in his arms. At the rope now, high enough that the fire below was just gusts of warmth and wind-battered smoke, she pulled the knife from her teeth to show Razo her only weapon. He pointed to a fat, intricate knot securing the rod in the latch, then he made a sawing gesture in his hand. Rin cut at the rope, the effort making the metal cage creak. Her heart blasted with each beat. Razo shut his eyes, his lips muttering something that looked like, "Please, please, please." Just as Aileann had in Kelish. The echo gave Rin chills.

At last her knife hit the metal rod, and Rin pulled the rope loose, opening the door. Relief poured through her like warm water. She stuck the knife in the ropes for Razo to pick up and took Tusken from his arms. The sudden weight almost threw her from the tree, but she gripped the sleeping boy and bade her trembling legs to hold her steady. She inched along the branch to the trunk, Razo behind her. Tusken moaned softly in his sleep, and even in that moment of terror, balancing for her life, scraping her legs on the bark and barely able to move, she could not help pressing her lips against his damp brow. He smelled of road dust and Razo's own sweat. Her heart yearned for him and she thought, *I'll protect you, lamby. I'll die for you.*

She felt the moment when she passed from the bare branch to the curtained privacy of the tree's foliage, felt it like a sigh. Razo was just

behind her. That was when they heard the shouting.

"They've seen the empty cage," Razo whispered. "We've got to run, now."

"Just climb a little higher and they won't find us."

"Rinna, come on, we—"

"We can't run fast enough. They'll catch us on the ground. The tree will hide us."

Razo's eyes darted wildly, trying to see the soldiers through the leaves. "I'll drop first, then you give me Tusken and—"

"Climb up, Razo," she said. "They'll look for movement, they'll look on the ground. They won't look up. People rarely look up, rarely notice trees at all. Listen to me and climb!"

Razo hesitated. Rin did not talk like that to Razo. This journey was pulling words and demands out of her, and she feared she'd done wrong. When she spoke again, it was in the barest whisper.

"Please. I know trees, and I know people. This will work."

Razo looked with longing at the ground, but he nodded and took Tusken from her arms.

The boy was so completely asleep he did not even moan as Razo propped him on his shoulder, holding him with one hand and climbing the tree with the other. They went up two more branches to where the leaves were thickest.

Razo was staring down, scratching nervously at his hair, and glancing back at Rin with an "Are you sure?" expression. She nodded. If the soldiers stood close to the oak's trunk and looked up, they would most definitely see three people huddled there. But she believed they would not look.

Rin sat next to Razo, sharing a branch, the three of them squeezed between two other limbs. Razo's breath was coming in fast huffs, from the exertion of climbing with one arm, but also, Rin guessed, from fear. Voices darted their way, shouts of confusion and anger at the cage hanging empty. Now the soldiers would search the wood.

She needed to stay still, stay quiet. But Rin's heart was thumping again as if to break free, her limbs shaking. Selia had said she would kill Razo and Tusken. Surely she would now that Rin had set them free. And kill Rin too. All of them, in retribution for what Rin had done. The fright and effort burned, and hot tears oozed down her cheeks. Fear was everything and everything hurt so much, she wondered if she might die.

Calm. Please, be calm.

She was too terrified to remember that greeness into herself. She felt ravaged by her memory of Selia's words, ruined, sure that death was imminent for all of them, and it was her fault. The fear and guilt was white-hot pain. Her trembling shook Tusken, and he murmured. What if he woke and cried out? The searchers would find them in an instant. Razo seemed to be shaking as much as she. They needed to calm.

Inside the tree, water flowed like blood in a body, keeping the branches strong and the leaves alive and green. So sleepy, so content with its roots in the wonderful dampness of deep, deep soil, with the sun down and the leaves at rest. Rin put one of her arms around her brother's shoulder, and between them embraced Tusken, still fast asleep.

Razo's eyes met hers, startled and unsure.

"Try to sleep," she mouthed silently.

Razo grimaced, his eyes saying, "Are you crazy?"

She took a deep breath to show that she was trying, then closed her own eyes. Hoofbeats and shouts from the searchers made her heartbeats scatter and her legs ache, but if she could absorb the calm of the tree, perhaps Razo and Tusken would feel it from her.

She knew that if she listened to the tree, she was sure to encounter that nauseating wrongness. That fear was nothing compared to her terror of Selia and her searchers. Shouts raised goose bumps on her arms, but she clung both to the tree and to the idea of the tree. She could feel her brother start to relax beside her, his breath slowing almost to the pace of Tusken's calm inhales and exhales. The nausea was creeping around her, the loathing filling her limbs like water in a jar. She welcomed it now, ready to greet that horror over the reality below. Her stomach rolled, her bones shuddered, but she did not let go.

Still half-aware of the danger outside their house of leaves, Rin plunged herself through the sickening dread into oak-bound memories until the present was a distant idea . . . and then, just gone.

Chapter 16

Rin's mind was falling through rings of memory, rains and drafts and seasons of early cold, days of clouds and days of sun, circles and circles, back and deeper, protected inside a hide of bark, tender roots buried deep, fragile leaves lifted high.

She'd grown up plunging into the thoughts of trees, but this felt new. Perhaps she experienced it differently because she had a name for it now—tree-speaking. Or perhaps in her desperation for escape she submerged herself deeper than ever before. She let all these possibilities pass through her like water through roots, without stopping to consider. Still her mind fell.

It was not a dream—time still moved in dreams, things happened in order. This was a moment with no comprehension of time, like a circle has no beginning or end. Rin met herself there, saw herself in a way without seeing—a girl who listens to trees.

The slick wrongness poured over her, coated her. But she did not try to flee, still aware that the terror that existed without was worse. She needed to keep Razo and Tusken resting and quiet, and she needed to hide from searchers, from Selia.

Alongside the tree's own memories of rain and sun and storm, Rin met her own memory, the one she'd been fleeing from for months—*Wilem is beside her in a tree, leaning near, and warmth rushes through her whole body as she realizes, I can make him stay.*

Rin jolted, almost waking from the tree sleep. Stumbling across that memory was like tripping on a hidden root and falling flat. She became aware of cicadas screaming in the forest night, the crackle of leaves rubbing in the breeze. Rin's heart slammed into her ribs, and she felt sleeping Tusken stir and heard Razo moan.

No, Rin. Calm. Peace. If embracing the memory of Wilem was the only way to maintain the tree's calm, then she would face it. That spinning wrongness clutched at her, but she clenched her jaw and submitted to the memory—not the thin, scrubbed thing she'd toyed with these past months. The truth of it, all of it.

For the first time since Nordra's stick, Rin desperately wants something for herself. Razo was her best friend, but he's gone off into the world, and the homestead has become just a place for him to visit. Besides, he has Dasha. Who does Rin have?

For one afternoon, she has Wilem.

He comes over to wrestle and run with the Agget-kin, and mostly with Kif and Len, two of Rin's older nephews. She likes the way Wilem looks, black eyes and black hair that is so long in front he has to push it out of his eyes. His eyeteeth are especially pointy, and when he smiles they peek below his lips and give him an exciting, feral look. She finds it easy to fall into Wilem's pattern of speech, his careless but thoughtful way of seeing the world, easier than anyone besides Razo and Ma. It is a plea sure to emulate him, to feel as he must feel.

They sit in a tree all afternoon, hiding from work and tossing pine cones. And leaning closer to each other. The smell of his skin . . . That treetop afternoon seems like the life of a different Rin. She is as carefree as Razo, has some of that pretty sauciness that Ulan does when she tosses her hair and laughs, some of that sweet girliness that Genna does when she bats her lashes. Rin does not worry about all the chores she is missing and making sure the little ones are fed and readied for bed—for the first time, she feels not like Ma's shadow, but like her own girl. A girl who might be worth knowing. She feels extraordinary.

She takes deadly aim at her brother Jef's tousled head and pegs him with a pine cone. He looks around wildly, but not up. People rarely look up, *she realizes.*

Wilem laughs. "You're wild, Rinna. You're dangerous."

She's never wanted to kiss someone before. But now as she leans against Wilem, she imagines how it might be—like how she feels when her hair is freshly washed and a warm breeze blows it back from her face, like when her belly is full of roasted quail and fresh bread. Extraordinary.

Dusk settles around them in great dark folds, and the nephews come looking for their friend.

"Wilem!" they shout, not knowing which tree is his perch. "Come on, we've got a prank planned. Are you still here? Come out!"

Without a word to Rin, Wilem begins to scramble down the tree. Rin feels all the air go out of her, all the girliness and prettiness and possibilities. She climbs down after him, faster than is safe. Her only thought is, If Wilem goes away, the wild Rin goes too. *And she wants to keep that Rin so badly, she wants to cling to her and not return to being Ma's shadow—silent, harmless, forgettable.*

She's nearly climbed to the Forest floor when in her haste, she slips off a branch and into Wilem. He catches her. And he doesn't let go. Her heart bangs against his chest, a sensation that's pleasantly painful, and with barely a hesitation, she breaks that safe barrier she's built since Nordra and the stick. She speaks her desire.

"Stay," she tells him. She does not just say the word—she speaks it with meaning, with intent. She hurls the word like a stone. He stays, for the moment at least. But his gaze shifts, his arm drops from her back. One word won't keep him.

This is when she lies.

She studies his face, as she did long ago with Nordra, and knows what words will convince him to stay. She can read his anxious doubt—his admiration of her nephews is intense, and he fears they think him a hanger-on.

Don't, Rin, *she warns herself, but she feels so free, so wild; no fledgling on the nest but a falcon commanding the winds.*

"Kif and Len never really liked you, you know," she says, one hand smoothing Wilem's tunic. His chest muscles flex under her hand.

"What do you mean?"

She glances up at him through her lashes and then back down.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you knew how they are. Meaner than hungry dogs. They talk about you when you're not here, say you're boring and foolish. They were planning some cruel joke on you to night, that's why I wanted to keep you away from them."

"But . . . they wanted my help pranking Jef."

She shakes her head sadly. "Kif and Len are waiting by Jef's house, but they mean to shove you into the dung pit." That was not a playful prank—that was the kind of cruel trick no kin of Ma would dare pull.

Wilem's brows pinch together. "Why?"

His sadness almost changes her mind then, but there are so many unspoken words beckoning her, filling the world with new risks, new chances and adventures. She's reminded of her brother Deet's report of drinking his first ale in the city, how it was bitter and made his stomach sore, but he did not want to stop drinking. Words are ale on her tongue and in her belly, heavy and foul. And irresistible.

She lies some more. "They're blind for not liking you. It makes me so angry. I didn't want to tell you, I wanted to keep you with me, keep you safe from their cruelty. You should stay with me, be my friend. I won't treat you like that. You're smarter than them anyhow, so let's play a trick on them instead."

"Sure, that's what we'll do." Wilem's eyes light with pained pride. "We'll show them."

Words are easy when she allows herself to use them without fear or shame. Now speaking is like that rare and perfect kind of sleep when she can control her dreams, guiding her own mind to what images she wants to see. She is controlling this moment. She is not a feeble stick of a girl after all. All this time wasted, acting as Ma's shadow, hiding inside others' behaviors, being small, dismissible. Now she feels power like a staff in her hands. Even the wrongness of what she does thrills her.

Why has she been so afraid of words? They are wonderful!

She steps closer to Wilem. "They mocked you, said you'd never kissed a girl. They said you would be too afraid to kiss me. I said you weren't afraid."

She moves even closer and puts her hands on his arms. It feels dangerous, the most dangerous thing she's ever done. But she feels crazy with words, she feels wild. She believes she can keep creating this perfect dream for herself, and it will never have a chance to fray and fall apart. She just has to keep talking.

"Kiss me, Wilem. Just kiss me, and prove everyone wrong. You'll show them."

Kiss me. *They are not idle words. She can feel the strength of them, a command as sure as if she were his queen. And he obeys. He holds her arms, he kisses her lips, fast and hard. It does not feel good like a breeze combing through freshly washed hair. It feels like what it is—a hard, cold lie pretending to be affection.*

"See? I did it! I'm not afraid." But there is a sadness in his eyes, as if he has been asked to give away something precious, like Nordra handing over her doeskin boots.

"Kiss me more," Rin demands. "Everyone thinks of you as that lonely boy with a boring brother. They don't really care about you. But I care. I'm the only one, Wilem. If you want Kif and Len to respect you, if you want to be more than just that boy, *you need to want to kiss me. You need to be with me."*

His eyes are hot. He leans to her again, meeting mouth to mouth. She grabs his hair and holds him to her lips, kissing awkwardly, trying to find in that touch the feeling she left up in the tree, trying to find the Rin whom Wilem called wild. And he is trying to please her. He is in pain from her words, she knows, and he is desperate for her touch to take away that pain. She allows his lips to move with hers, against hers, to feel that his lips are soft, his chin and cheeks rough. She touches her tongue to his, and the feel of it startles her heart. She grips his arms with her fingers, pulling him even closer, her lips strong, her mouth open, urgent, getting cross that she's still so hollow. She feels wild. But not loved.

Wilem stumbles back and looks at her, breathing through his mouth. He says, "What now?"

You should want to kiss me, *she thinks*. You should want to stay near me. I shouldn't need to trick you for a kiss.

She hates the mean, hard sensation in her heart when she thinks that, hates realizing that Wilem does not love her. So she just shrugs, wishing him gone. And he goes, looking as sad as a rain-beaten sapling with his head hanging down, heavy with her lies.

It is a relief not to be burdened with regret. Anger at his stupidity feels so much nicer.

A hot, sweet sensation fills her, burning and delicious, and she walks through the homestead for the first time knowing that she is better than everyone. There are ways to make them see that. She can read their faces as clearly as looking at the sky to tell the weather. She's always been able to see lies and truths in people's eyes, to guess what thoughts they hid, though since making Nordra cry, she forbade herself from speaking on it. No more shackles, no more rules. Now she is powerful Rin.

Is this who she has been all along? When she's not Ma's shadow, when she's not mirroring those around her or huddled up, abashed and afraid to speak, is she so bold, so pretty and fearless, so strong? Then why has she been hiding? The true Rin is wonderful.

Kif and Len return later, claiming that Wilem accused Rin of lying and kissing him.

"We told him to go wash his nethers with pine cones," says Kif.

"Our aunt Rin would do no such thing," says Len. "Don't know what's gotten into that pokey-toothed fool."

"Wilem is no good," Rin says. "I was shocked by the things he said about you. No one talks like that about Agget-kin."

"That little rodent!" says Kif. "I'll never speak to Wilem again."

What a plea sure to lie! Her feet do not touch the ground, her blood rushes through her as warm as sleep, her smile feels real. She might do anything to nourish that invulnerable sensation, might cling to it for days, or perhaps forever.

But the next person she sees is Ma.

"What did Wilem do?" Ma asks, stepping onto her porch in her sleep clothes, her fists on her hips. "Go on and tell me, Rin, and I'll thrash his tunic off his hide."

Rin sees her ma's round face, her white-streaked black hair, frizzy and incorrigible, pulling free from its scarf, her brown eyes that see everybody. Ma cares for every person in the world the same, except for Rin. She calls Rin her lily on a pond, her morning bird song, and everyone knows that Ma loves her daughter just a little more.

Rin's heart isn't floating anymore. Her hands and feet feel made of stone.

"Nothing. Honest, Ma, he didn't do anything."

"You sure, my honey-eyed girl? You sure? Don't protect him, now. I won't put up with naughtiness, not in my homestead, not to my baby girl."

Still Rin wants to cling to her strength, wants to keep those words that remake the world into what ever she likes. And she doesn't want to feel sorrow for what she did to Wilem—she wants Ma to hate him, shoo him away, punish him for not wanting to kiss her, for having to be tricked, for leaving so easily.

"You just tell me the truth and I'll take care of it," says Ma.

The truth. Rin cannot tell her that. "He didn't do anything. We were playing a game. It was just a misunderstanding."

Ma frowns, but nods and goes back inside. Kif and Len groan, discouraged the fun of war is already over. They leave her standing under a fir tree. It is spring, and the night air has a bite to it.

The warmth, the surety, the strength drain from her, leaving her chilled and discarded, a late-winter cellar root. She waits until Ma is asleep before crawling under the blanket beside her, huddled on the edge of the cot, her eyes wide. The memory of that delicious strength stays with

her, like the scent of Wilem on her mouth. She enjoyed it. Even now she does not feel as bad as she should, and so she knows that makes her worse than bad.

She tosses in bed that night, the chill of her guilt settling over her. She cannot undo what she did. She cannot run far enough to get away from hurting Wilem, from lying and commanding. But even more, she is caged by the feeling that the true Rin—her deepest self, who was not simply mirroring others—was the girl who lied, who hurt and did not care. At her core, she is someone Ma would not love. All night, wrestling in the dark with sleep and with truth, she works to bury herself.



Rin slept inside the oak's thoughts. Its own memories of weather and growth continued to hum, and like a pond, its stillness reflected back herself. Suspended moments from her life swirled, pelting her like rocks lifted in a windstorm. She saw them the way a tree sees its years, rings circling each other, all memory existing at once—*living in the Forest in silence, not tree and not girl; getting lost in the trees all day and finally finding her way home, only to discover no one has noticed she's been missing; watching Razo leave the Forest for Tira, and feeling as if her insides have been scraped out and dumped aside; realizing for the first time that she is too big to curl up on her ma's lap.*

There, pulsing white, was seven-year-old Rin watching Nordra play. Thinking with the tree made Rin's own thoughts clear as snowmelt, and she saw that memory anew. *It is the first time in her life she is without Ma and Razo. She feels so terrifyingly alone, she scrambles for something to make her stronger, to make her all right, and discovers an ability sleeping inside her—to see, to speak, to command. That desire, that talent awakes, never to sleep again. The urge is compelling, but Rin fears the loss of Ma's love and squashes it down.*

Rin turned inside the tree, tracing memories from the years that followed Nordra and the stick, and saw how weakened she became, fighting something unknown inside, her whole self out of balance, tilting. The tree-speaking gave her a place to lean, but it could not cure her.

Other memories pulsed hot, linked in a white chain from Nordra and the stick to the present—*saying anything to keep Wilem close; warning Cilie to keep away from Tusken; asking Razo to guard Tusken with his life; convincing the woman in the inn not to jump; telling that squat mercenary to let the girl go.* There were more to these moments than she'd realized, a force behind her words, a power in her voice.

With a rising horror, Rin's sleep-self turned to face the most recent memories—*standing behind a cairn of stones, Razo and Tusken in a cage; feeling pinned by Selia's words, subdued and helpless. Selia speaking. Rin speaking. Words harder than words should be, words like wind, words like fire.*

Rin quaked but forced herself to name it.

I have people-speaking. I am like Selia.

Only then did what was inside her become worse than the world outside. Rin opened her eyes, barely swallowing a scream.

Chapter 17

Rin breathed in hard, shuddering gasps, taking in the waking world—the oak tree, the dark sky just stirred by light, Tusken asleep, and Razo staring.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

She nodded. "A . . . nightmare."

"Don't blame you. You were sleeping hard there at the end. I poked you for a bit but you didn't wake. Kind of scared me."

Rin sat up and leaves tumbled from her head onto her lap. Her hand flew to her hair, and she was suddenly terrified that she'd been turning into a tree.

Razo smiled. "I decorated you while you slept. Made you a little crown. I stuffed one leaf up your nose, but you just sneezed it out and kept sleeping."

I wasn't really sleeping, Rin thought. *I was*—She felt a jolt pass through her as she remembered her dream thoughts. *People-speaking.* She tasted bile on the back of her tongue. Could she really have people-speaking? That "curse" as Enna had called it, that decay that turned people into monsters who forced others to do what they did not will?

Rin hunched over, imagining the huge gray worm of her nightmares curled inside her. All her life, believing she was bad, she clenched up, acted with caution, never sure what she was hiding from. Could she give it a name now? *People-speaking.*

Isi had said it was the most dangerous of all the speaking gifts, the one sure to corrupt the speaker. Would she turn into another Selia? She feared she'd already begun—with Wilem, she'd begun.

Razo was lying back on a branch. Tusken was asleep on his chest, his face nestled into Razo's neck. Looking at them fanned away some of the smoke of her panic. She did not matter, not now. But she'd walk across the ocean to keep Razo and Tusken safe.

Rin peered through the leaves. She could see the dark shape of Castle Daire. "Is it still the same night?"

"What? Of course it is, though near dawn. I think I dozed there for a bit, and I haven't heard anyone since I woke up. They must be running in all directions, trying to find us before Selia notices we're missing and gets so angry her face swells up like a frog's." This thought seemed to please Razo,

and he closed his eyes for a moment, smiling. “All the same, they’re bound to come back for the cage, empty or not, so I think now would be a good time to flee.”

Rin climbed down first, hating the moment her body left the cover of leaves. Her foot crunched on acorns, and she winced in anticipation of crossbow bolts. Razo lowered himself to a branch farther down until he could hand her the sleeping boy. She carried Tusken as they walked, pressing his body as close to her chest as she had strength in her arms.

He’s all right, she told herself. *He’s out of that cage. That woman didn’t hurt him. We’ll get him back to his ma again.* After a cramped, short night resting in a tree, her arms gave out much sooner than she would have liked, and she reluctantly handed Tusken back to Razo. Razo groaned with the boy’s weight.

“You think he’s all right?” he whispered. “The way he sleeps . . .”

“He always sleeps like the dead.”

“Good boy. Shows real intelligence, I say.” Razo rubbed his chin softly against the boy’s head. “He wore himself out yesterday, fussing and crying, poor little man. It hasn’t been a feast-day banquet, I guess I can tell you. But we did all right, Tusken and I. We’re pals.”

She had not recovered from the oak sleep yet—her head felt heavy on her shoulders as if filled with sap, her eyes unused to looking around. “Razo, the girls . . .”

“I know.” His voice was tight.

“What are we going to do?”

“Rescue them, of course. Don’t worry, I’m plotting. But first I need to be sure you and Tusken are safe.”

Razo had changed these past couple of years, no question, and not just his height. He reeked with confidence. Rin watched him as she might watch a squirrel if she was lost in the deep Forest, with a hope it would lead her to its cache of nuts.

“Finn left us in Hendric to ride for Geric, to warn him we were going to Kel. Maybe we should get Tusken to safety and wait for Geric to come—”

“Come siege Castle Daire? Start a war with Kel? And in the meantime, leaving Dasha, Enna, and Isi at the mercy of Selia? Not on your life. I’m going in there to night and I’m going to get those girls out.”

Rin’s stomach did flip-flops like a fish on the riverbank. How could Razo sneak into a defended fortress and rescue three girls without meeting a

sword point? But she did not dare argue. The idea of people-speaking throbbed and stung, making her conscious of her every word.

They did not talk, careful in their footsteps to keep quiet. Razo's face became strained and red, and he seemed scarcely able to hold Tusken. They reached a copse of trees that wore their leaves low, creating an enclosure nearly as solid as a wattle-and-daub house. Razo collapsed inside, muttering that he needed to rest for a few moments. Rin guessed he had not had much sleep or food those past days.

Razo lay Tusken gently on a patch of grass and rested his own head on a tree root, stretching his legs and arms and groaning as if in pain.

"We need to lay low until night offers us some cover. It won't do our girls any good if I go barging at the castle in full sun and get shot down before I can even scale a wall."

"If you take a nap," Rin said, cautious with each word, "I can watch."

"I think I'd better . . ." Razo's eyes closed, and instantly came the low, grumbling snores she knew well. Tusken must have been used to the noise too, because he rolled in his sleep and nestled closer to Razo.

Dawn dripped through the leaves onto Rin's hands. She watched the two boys in their rest, her ears attuned to the sounds of the wood. Selia's searchers were out there. They would find them, kill Rin and probably Razo too, since he proved to be too much trouble, and take Tusken away. And beneath that worry, the slow, dark, greasy snake kept moving under her skin, that awareness of something wrong. After an hour or more, the anxiety became painful. Her heart beat so hard, it radiated sharp jabs through her chest.

I've got to keep watch, she told herself. *I need to stay calm. I need to protect them.*

But it was becoming unbearable. The anxiety of their situation beat at her, and she could not shut off the questions. *Am I a people-speaker? Have I always been? Am I going to turn into a Selia?*

The night before she had battled past the grimness that had blocked her from the trees' thoughts, and she had met the memory of what she'd done to Wilem and come out again. Perhaps she just needed more understanding and another encounter with trees to be at peace. She brushed her hand down the bark, alert to the silent hum of the tree. The crackle of bark and awareness of sunlight. A thrum that promised cool silence deep in the core.

She closed her eyes, succumbing to the question until she was inside the tree's thoughts, spinning again inside her own memories.



It's the morning after Wilem, and she feels as if she were tied in a knot only to pull loose by sunup. The events of last night are oddly hazy. She does not recall exactly what happened, and a tang of fear makes her fight against trying to recall. But there is a loose ache moving inside her, and she has an idea that if she just allows herself to speak freely, the ache will melt into relief—delight even. Some mysterious elation is still delicious on her tongue, making her insides rumble with hunger.

But there's Ma, humming while she works, smiling at her daughter. Guilt sinks inside Rin, and she's sure that she said something unforgivable, something that would make Ma not love her. So Rin stays quiet, helps prepare breakfast and clean up, and every moment that ticks by, she feels stretched farther away from that wild and brilliant Rin. Each time Ma touches her, speaks to her, Rin feels certain that she doesn't belong in this warm, happy house beside her good mother.

As soon as she can, she runs.

She runs away from the homestead and their neighbors, toward deepness. She falls into a fir tree, insisting herself into its thoughts, demanding its comfort. She expects the woody thoughts of trees to still her, but instead she is surrounded by what she's done. I lied to Wilem, I shattered his confidence, I filled him with sadness, and I did not even care. And I want to be that powerful again. *The memory catches her in its teeth.*

She's on her hands and knees, breathless. Scrambling back to her feet, she stumbles into an aspen grove, the round leaves chiming, the sunlight filtered to soft warmth. She tumbles against knotty white bark.

Take it away, *she begs.* Change me, undo me, make it not real. Make me someone else.

The tree does not hear her and obey, not as Wilem had. The tree simply reflects back to her what she is, what she's done. She is a girl with a desire to speak out and control, to raise herself above the rest. And knowing it was wrong, she still claimed that power and used it against Wilem. But she's never heard of people-speaking, doesn't comprehend what's happening, knows only that she feels wrong. That confusion and wrongness are a black loathing that suffocates her. She clings to the tree, and the sensation intensifies, burns spitting hot and smoky like grease in the fire.

She doesn't want to remember, she wants oblivion, and all the trees offer is the truth—who she is, what she's done. Feeling twisted and yanked and dumped on the ground, she rips apart her own memory so she won't have to look at it anymore. But hiding from what she did can't ease her wrongness.

I'm bad. Ma won't love me if she knows. I'm—

She pulls away from the tree, crouches over her knees, and cries for as long as the tears will come.

Chapter 18

Rin's thoughts heaved inside her. She pushed away from the tree and hunched over, her belly and throat cramping. She pressed her hands against her eyes, against her chest, breathing until she could get herself under control, trying to keep quiet so as not to wake Razo and Tusken.

A rotting sensation throbbed in her gut, reminding her of what she'd done. But there was a little comfort too, just to have a glimpse of clarity. The trees of her Forest had not rejected her. It was the other way around—she had flinched away from them. These past months, she thought she'd thrown away the memory of what happened with Wilem and what she discovered about herself. But it had swelled inside her, the hidden thought becoming the loudest in her head. Ever since, when she'd tried to listen to the trees' calmness, the thought they reflected back to her was that pulsating secret that lurked just below the surface. She'd sought peace, but the memory of her mistake and the glimpse of her wrongness sickened her. Inside a tree's thoughts, she was surrounded by her own self. And after Wilem, that was a place she did not want to be.

I didn't know, she tried to comfort herself. She had not known such a thing as people-speaking existed; she had never met anyone like Selia.

Any child of Ma's should know better than to act that way, she thought. *I knew it was wrong, even if I didn't know why, and I did it anyway.*

That gray worm stretched, reminding her that she still wanted to be that wild Rin, still yearned to speak like Selia, to not be afraid of herself, to claim what she could do, and to let everyone see her shine.

Razo gasped and sat upright, his hands clutching his chest. He looked around deliriously until he saw Tusken beside him. The little boy snorted in his sleep and flopped onto his other side, his mouth open and drooling. Razo breathed out in relief, patting the boy's head.

"Thought he was gone. Dreamed she took him." He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Ugh, that was an ugly dream. I won't be sleeping any more today. Did you hear anything out there?"

Rin shook her head, ashamed she had not been paying attention. Razo stole out, tiptoeing around their small glade, pausing to listen. He slipped back in and sighed as he sat, speaking low so his voice would not carry

beyond their tree. “Now, you’d better tell me why you’re being so naughty and hiding things from me.”

Rin’s heart was a startled jackrabbit. “Wh-what?”

Razo looked at her hard, his brown eyes glittering in the rising sunlight. “Well, I *was* teasing, going to accuse you of hiding all the food. But since you’re acting guiltier than Incher with his pockets full of bread dough, why don’t you just tell me what you thought I meant?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head, shrugged, looked away. “I didn’t . . . I mean, nothing . . .”

Razo’s gaze was bright. “That won’t do it, Rinna-roo. You’re hiding something from me. Come on before I get my feelings hurt and start to cry.” He let his lower lip quiver.

She smiled with a shrug. “Nothing really. I just . . . I’m realizing that I had—or have—some kind of understanding of trees. Sort of.”

“Understanding of trees. Interesting. Go on.”

He was not going to let her get away with shrugging it off. She could tell him this part but not her fears about people-speaking, of course. “Sometimes I can think more clearly when I’m close to a tree, like I’m thinking with it. And I can kind of hear them, be aware of where their roots are growing or their branches, feel the memory of past years and weather inside their trunks, and it makes me . . . makes me calmer to do it.” She was silent a moment, listening for searchers before asking, “Can you do that?”

Razo blinked. “Am I still asleep?’Cause you sound like you’re talking in dream weirdness.”

Rin cleared her throat. “Isi called it tree-speaking.”

Razo slapped the ground, but even in his passion he was careful to keep his voice low. “Aw, really? Tree-speaking? That’s not fair. Why does everyone—wait, maybe it’s me. Do you think it’s me? I mean, Enna and Isi, and Dasha too, now you. Maybe there’s something about me that sort of sparks something in people, and wherever I go, people just start understanding everything because it . . . because I . . .”

“I think Isi could talk to horses and birds before she came to Bayern, and Dasha knew water-speaking when she was a little girl in Tira.”

Razo considered this. “All right, all right. But all the same—” He considered it some more. “But . . . but . . . yes, all right.” He considered again. “Fine. That’s . . . you’re probably right. Fine. But did you know that

I'm deadly good with a sling?" He nudged her with his elbow. "Huh? Did you know that? I'll bet you didn't know that. Huh? Huh?"

Rin swatted his arm away, trying not to laugh, or he was sure to get a big head.

"So, trees, huh? Well, fine, as long as that's all."

Rin let her face go dead serious. "Also, I can talk to bears and wolverines."

"You're joking now. You're teasing me now. I can tell." He stared at his sister as if he could see through her eyes to her thoughts beyond. Rin did not flinch. "You're not teasing, are you?"

She could not help the smile that teased the corners of her mouth. He sighed and leaned back.

"You *are* joking. Good. Or not. It would've come in handy about now, commanding an army of bears to go attack the castle."

"And wolverines."

"Right. And wolverines. But well enough. What good's bear-speaking anyway? I tell you, I'm honestly relieved not to have such a burden. Couldn't stand to have to talk to bears all the time. It's *I love berries and fish,* day and night. And their breath stinks."

"Not like anyone else I know."

"So you say." His look was suspicious. "You're still being dodgy. Are you hiding something else?"

"Only this . . ." She pulled a handful of grass from the ground behind her back and tossed it at his face. He answered with a clod of dirt to the chest; then they were scrambling for any ammunition, flinging sticks and grass and leaves and pebbles, then wrestling each other as if they were children again. Razo only grappled with one arm—to give her a fair shot, she thought. She was not sure how the wrestling match changed to an embrace, but moments later her arms were around his neck, and he was rubbing her back, promising her everything would be all right.

I'm scared, she wanted to say. *And I'm wrong inside too, like Selia. And I failed the queen. I can't trust myself, and I don't think I can go home again or I might hurt Ma and the little ones. And I don't want you ever to know.*

"Thanks for that rescue back there, by the way," he said.

She nodded her head against his chest, feeling like a little girl. She remembered a time they'd been playing in the trees when she was six or so. He'd dared her to climb higher than she ever had. He'd never dared her to

do something she could not do, so she had not questioned it. She had climbed and climbed and climbed, the sound of his cheers pushing her faster and higher, though soon the height was making her head feel swimmy and swoony, and her hands seemed too small to grasp another branch.

I can't do it, she had thought as her legs started to shake. *I can't go any higher.* And that was when she had fallen, smacking into branches as she went down. He had caught her at the bottom and had not said a thing as he'd held her and let her tremble from the pain and fright of falling.

The next day when Razo was elsewhere, Rin had climbed the tree again.

"I wish we could go home now," she said, homesickness so thick it filled her up inside, pressed out against her ribs and up into her neck.

She felt him nod. His muscles clenched and his jaw clicked, and she could sense how furious he was, how determined. No chance Razo would run when Dasha, Enna, and Isi were prisoners in that castle. But everything would be all right, because her big brother was here. She did not let herself stop to think why, instead of being relieved, she tingled with uncomfortable chill.

Rin squeezed her brother a little tighter, and he groaned painfully. She let go.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded. "Fine. I'm fine."

He scooted beside Tusken, resting on his side, and Rin did the same. She placed her hand on Tusken's back, feeling the slow rise and fall of his sleepy breaths.

"We should get moving as soon as he wakes," Razo said, idly rubbing his left side. "North, where the searchers won't expect us to be. Then you and Tusken hide out to night, like you did last night, and I'll go to the castle." She must have looked worried, because Razo added, "Trust me, Rin. I've been in stickier spots."

That thought was not comforting. Her arguments and fears for his safety rose into her throat, but she swallowed them down, afraid of the damage she could do by speaking. Instead she asked, "Razo, who is Selia?"

Razo groaned and rolled onto his back, resting his head on his right arm. "Selia the soulless. Selia the treacherous snake. Selia the unkillable, apparently. She was Isi's lady-in-waiting back in Kildenree. When Isi was traveling to Bayern to marry Geric, Selia and half of Isi's guards rebelled and tried to kill everyone else. Isi escaped, but Selia had gone on into

Bayern and pretended she was the Kildenrean princess. Geric hadn't met Isi yet, you see. And . . . well, it's a long story, but in the end, I myself was an indispensable part of how Isi convinced Geric and his father that she was the real princess. Ask Isi yourself. She'll tell you."

Rin nodded, to show that she was certain it was so.

"There you go. Now when you go home, you just convince Jef about that, will you? Anyway, all of Selia's evil guards were killed in a fight (in which I performed nobly), and later Selia was supposedly executed. She'd named the punishment herself—she was put in a barrel studded with nails and dragged through the streets until she was dead. Guess that didn't happen after all. Talked her way out of it, most likely. I wonder what dim-witted soldier or prison guard let her go and put a pig or something in the barrel instead. Hmph. Poor little innocent pig."

"And now she's come back and wants to kill Isi."

Razo sat up, looking around with mock terror. "The pig's come back to kill Isi? We're all doomed!"

"I meant Selia, you goat brain."

"Oh, right. Selia." Razo began stacking rocks on top of each other. "She wants them alive for now, or else she wouldn't bother kidnapping Tusken. Otherwise, you think I'd risk waiting till nightfall? She came for the boy on purpose, sneaked into Geric's camp, talked her way near Tusken and meant to take him alone. But I came along. Don't know how I managed. She was telling me to give her the boy and leave her alone, but I clung on. I believed every word she said and I felt like a fool for not obeying—she's gotten scary good with that people-speaking—but I'd promised you I'd take care of Tusken and I didn't let go."

"You managed to defy her?" Rin marveled, remembering the power of Selia's words the night before.

"Just in that. When I wouldn't put Tusken down, she seemed to change her mind anyway, saying two prisoners were better than one and it'd save her having to carry him. She told me to bring him along, and I trotted after her with Tusken in my arms like a good boy carrying wood for his ma and never so much as called out a warning to Bayern's Own. I tell you, when I think about it, I get an itch right here"—he pointed to the spot between his eyebrows—"that about makes me insane."

Rin recalled asking Razo to watch Tusken, keep him safe. Ordering him? Was it her own people-speaking that had helped him stay with Tusken? The

idea did not please her—it filled Rin with shame. She tried to shut it off.

"Selia called Isi something odd." Rin closed her eyes, looking for the memory. "Princess. Something princess."

"Right. Isi was—" Razo put up his hand for silence, listening. Rin listened too. The wood croaked and shook and swayed—clicking of insects, moaning of trees, and silence that was heavy with air and sunshine—but she could hear nothing human. When Razo spoke again, his voice was even quieter than before.

"Isi was the Crown Princess in Kildenree before her mother decided to marry her off instead of letting her inherit the throne. Don't know why Selia still calls her Crown Princess—just to mock her, I guess. She is rotten and wormy and so far gone I wouldn't be surprised to see her bite the head off a songbird for fun. Seriously, people-speaking might as well be a wasting disease."

Rin shuddered, wishing she could rest somewhere far away from herself. "What's it like when Selia tells you what to do?"

"Like she's cast a line and hook down my throat, and is pulling fish out of my belly, and all I can do is sit and watch. And gag."

Rin wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Eww. Was Selia always like that—controlling people with her words?"

"No, not like last night. She probably always had a way with people, could be very convincing and all. But when I first saw her, the king ordered her to be put in chains, and despite her fussing and screaming, the guards still carried her away. Seems like she's grown in her talent, hasn't she? Even now . . ." He scratched his head. "You feel it too? Even though she's not here and talking in my face, I still feel . . . kind of foolish not to like her. My head knows she's rotten, but I want to keep believing her."

"I was wondering—you know, just musing—when I asked you to take care of Tusken, if you felt at all like you do when Selia—"

"It's funny you should ask, because I'm always confusing you with Selia . . . Wait, which one are you again?"

"Never mind, I was just—"

"You were serious?" Razo squinted at her. "Why would you even ask me that? Rin, you and Selia are about as much alike as a pig and a raven."

"And I would be . . . ?"

"The raven, of course. Selia just sits around and squeals. Ooh, it's going to be fun to see my Dasha roast and drown her! I wish this day would hurry

along already."

Razo thought he heard something, and he quieted to listen. But the noises of the wood seemed normal to Rin. She raised her hands to swat a leaf. A long thin touch of coolness ran across her bare wrist, though nothing was there. She kept sweeping her arm as if reaching for the sky and saw it at last, a single strand of a spider's web stretched between two trees. She felt it stay with her, lengthening as her arm moved, until it snapped and floated down.

Rin stared at the broken ends, twisting and drifting in and out of sight. If she had been with anyone else in the world, she would not have spoken aloud her fear, but to Razo she said, "They could already be dead."

"Not my Dasha. Don't let her fool you with her smiling and hopping around all the time. She's smart as a mongoose. And Isi and Enna aren't exactly thick in the head either. You'll see. They'll stay nice and alive as long as they can. You can bet your boots on that, Rinny-roo."

Rin snorted with disgust. "You tried that one before and it didn't work then either."

"Rinny-roo doesn't enchant you?" He mouthed it a couple of times, then shrugged. "You're right. I'll find the right nickname sooner or later. And the moment nightfall gives me some good shade for sneaking around, I'll find a way into the castle."

But how? And if he did manage to get inside, what good could he do? While Selia had been speaking, Isi could not manage to answer, let alone free Tusken. Then again, Rin could not imagine that Selia stayed with the three girls in the castle, speaking to them constantly. They must be jailed—and surely no jail could hold Enna, let alone Isi and Dasha.

"We need to get to them when Selia's not there," Rin said. "When they hear you and Tusken are safe, they'll break free."

"See, I tried to convince you that you're almost as smart as I am. But you always insist, 'No, no, Razo, you're the smart one. I'm just happy to be your baby sister. I'm just thrilled to—' "

Rin's water skin smacked him in the shoulder, and he stopped talking to take a long drink.

Tusken sat up, rubbed his eyes, and blinked at the world. Rin and Razo were immediately at his side. Rin stroked his hair, and he blinked at her several times, yawned hugely, and looked at Razo, who was grinning.

“Morning, Tusk! Look who joined us! See, I told you we’d find our Rinna-girl sooner or later.”

Tusken lay his head against her shoulder.

“Win,” he said happily. “Win, Win, Win . . .”

She hugged him and hugged him, relishing the tingling gladness that filled her. And thinking of Isi, she kissed him all over his face and neck and hands, and loved him as much as his mother might if she were there herself. He laughed and wriggled until he grew tired of the affection and rolled back to Razo and into his lap, the spot he had no doubt occupied for days.

“Ma?” Tusken asked, his fingers scratching Razo’s unshaven cheeks.

“We’ll see her soon too,” Razo said. “Maybe tomorrow. That cage game was getting old, wasn’t it? Whoo-wee. But just you wait, little man, all the games we’re going to play today—hide-and-find-me, and squirrel’s tail, and if Uncle Razo is lucky, maybe even bathe-the-stinky-boy-in-the-nearest-body-of-water. How’s that, huh? I told you and told you we were going to have the best time ever. Now I want to see if you’ve grown any more ribs this morning—better count them to make sure. One, two, three, four—no fair wiggling and laughing. You’re making me lose count! I’ll have to start over. One, two . . .”

The boy had endured days of cramped travel, not enough food, crying for his mother and father, and not understanding what was happening. And now all he wanted was to play. So as they walked north, they played chase, sometimes hopping on one leg for a stretch or running backward. Whenever Tusken spoke loudly, Razo pretended not to hear.

“What’s that?” Razo said in an exaggerated whisper. “I can only hear you when you sound like this.”

Tusken seemed to enjoy making whisper noises, and for the most part kept his voice quiet. When Rin found a hazelnut tree and stopped to pick clusters of the fruit for breakfast, Razo taught Tusken to climb.

“What a smart boy. Look how he’s found a handhold. A Forest boy, natural as can be, no fancy folk weakness in our Tusken.”

“Take care he doesn’t fall and break an arm.”

Razo scoffed, one hand resting lightly on Tusken’s back as he climbed higher. “Really, as if I haven’t been around plenty of children. We were scaling trees like this before we could walk, and we never—”

Tusken’s hand slipped, and he gave a strangled call. Razo dove, catching the prince a few handbreadths above the ground and groaning in pain. He

stared at Tusken and Tusken stared at him, his eyes wide and mouth open as if deciding just how loudly to wail before letting it all out. Tusken took a deep breath, then shouted, "Again! Again!" banging happily on Razo's head.

"Shh," Rin reminded the boy.

Razo forced a smile. "Right. Again. Um, how about we take a nice easy walk for a bit, toward that noise that just might be a stream? Huh? And wash out Uncle Razo's scrapes? That sound like buckets of fun?"

Razo moaned again as he got to his feet.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Rin asked.

Razo shrugged. "It's nothing, just bruised a bit."

He was lying, Rin could see. But they arrived at the stream and Rin let the idea drop away as they washed and drank. Razo feared it was too good a landmark for the searchers, so they left quickly, crossing the water on stones, carrying Tusken over the muddy banks to firm dirt that marked no prints. For some time after, Razo would not speak, giving all his attention to listening.

"We're mushroom hunting," Rin told Tusken. "We have to be quiet or we'll scare the mushrooms away."

Tusken nodded seriously. "Sss," he said, trying to make a *shh* sound. And he tiptoed noisily from tree to tree.

Talking to Tusken was a relief, and Rin wondered if young children were not affected by people-speaking, perhaps not until they were old enough to think about themselves more and care what others said. That was a good thought. Maybe after they rescued the fire sisters, Rin could travel from city to city and hire herself as a nurse-mary, caring for babies and young children, and . . . and never speaking to the parents and running off as soon as the children were old enough to be affected by her speech. She sighed with the ache in her chest. Imagining her future was like searching for a dropped needle with her eyes closed.

That was when a new idea began to poke at her. *You should sneak into the castle. Razo could stay with Tusken and then they'd both be safe. If you're caught or killed, no loss. Razo and Tusken could find Geric and save the girls some other way. You might even succeed. You've always been good at sneaking. Don't make Razo risk his life. Risk your own.*

She put a hand on her belly and felt how soft it was, imagined how easily a sword would part that skin, how simple it would be for a bolt to slide

through her and end everything. And how Ma would ache to hear of it.

Razo's better at this sort of thing. I don't know how to fight or break into castles. All I can do is listen to trees. A tree isn't like fire, a tree can't end wars and stop bad people. A tree just . . . just is. I just am. And I don't know how to people-speak, not like Selia. She can stop the fire sisters from burning—I could barely get a boy to kiss me. I should take care of Tusken, and Razo should be the hero. He's smart, he's been out in the world stopping wars and doing big things. He'll be all right. There's nothing to worry about.

And she worried all day.

Chapter 19

They walked, and Rin watched the shadow of the sun, feeling its downward plunge tug on her, promising afternoon, and after that, night. The day seemed motionless, a kettle of water waiting to boil; and yet at the same time, it sped recklessly forward to the moment when Razo would leave and might not come back.

Rin's stomach was growling when they came upon a group of quail.

"Rin," Razo whispered, and understanding, she dug through her pack and handed over her sling, as his had been taken by Selia's men. She did not offer stones, guessing Razo would already have a pocketful. While Razo crept after the prey, Rin followed Tusken to a log to hunt for bugs. A few minutes later, she heard the crunch of a boot to her left and assumed it was Razo. She turned instead to meet the eyes of a soldier in a metal helmet and leather vest, his expression as startled as hers. Her heart banged once, as if just coming back to life.

Running to Tusken, she yelled, "Razo!"

At the same time, the soldier hollered, "I've got them! I've—"

She heard Razo's footfalls, his sling whirling. The soldier veered away from Rin and toward Razo, his sword out.

Rin scooped up Tusken without stopping and fled toward the thicker trees. She heard a dull thud, glanced back and saw the soldier stagger. The sword was still in his hand, though his eyes looked slightly dazed. Razo placed another stone in his sling as he walked backward, buying himself enough time and distance to get in another shot before the sword reached him. The soldier lifted his weapon and roared as he swung at Razo.

Rin stumbled on a tree root and looked where she was going again, clinging to Tusken.

"Wazo?" said the boy. "Wazo doing?"

"Nothing, just playing," Rin whispered, gasping through the fear for enough breath to speak. "Everything's fine. But we need to be very quiet, all right?"

She peeked back again. The soldier lay on the ground, motionless. Razo was stooped over him, holding the soldier's sword. Rin did not realize how hard she was squeezing Tusken until he started to cry.

“Sorry, lamby,” Rin said between pants as she pushed herself to race faster. “Hush now. It’s all right.”

In a few moments, Razo was hurrying beside them, his forehead damp with sweat. The soldier’s sword hung from his belt, clanging against his knee as he ran.

“That one’s down.” Razo’s tone was casual, but his face was full of pain, and he was breathing hard. “Don’t know if there were others close enough to hear his hollering. Can’t chance it. Let’s go northeast for a bit.”

When Razo did not offer to take Tusken from Rin’s arms, Rin panicked, thinking that the soldier had gotten him with his sword after all. But she looked Razo over and did not see any blood, and he did not complain.

They ran hard to get some space between themselves and the soldiers, then changed course so there was no straight line to follow. Northeast they traveled, and then east, so as to confuse the searchers but still keep Daire close. Soon they slowed, taking care in their passage to leave no boot-print, no twig broken. Tusken sat on Rin’s shoulders, and he fussed and screeched from time to time, anxious to get down. Their pace was plodding and Rin itched to just bolt, but Razo insisted they keep on with the trackless sneaking. After a time, Rin just could not carry the boy anymore, and she let him down to run alongside them.

There were no human sounds from the wood, and Rin had finally let herself breathe easy when Razo flipped out his sling and let loose a stone. Her hands clasped her chest as she searched for sight of the enemy. It was a squirrel.

“Sorry,” said Razo. “I spotted dinner.”

It was afternoon when they stopped again, Tusken so tired of walking he was likely to draw notice with his howls of protest. They chanced a small fire, finding a nice dense glade to hide in. Rin gathered wood and fished her small flint bundle from the depths of her pack, where it had lain unused and unneeded while she’d been traveling with the fire sisters. She made triple sure each piece of wood was completely dry, and Razo hopped around, arranging each stick to keep the fire burning clean with no smoke.

They roasted a squirrel and a quail on sticks, then ate the bland, hot meat and licked their fingers. It was not enough to fill their bellies, but in the Forest, Razo and Rin were used to not enough. Tusken ate his fill and curled up beside Rin. Soon his head nodded onto her chest and his breathing went slow and soft. Rin pressed her lips to the top of his head.

“Thanks for keeping him safe.”

“’Course,” said Razo. “That’s what I do—keep people safe, and save people, and find murderers, and get a nice fat quail for lunch. Wasn’t that a nice fat quail?”

Rin smiled. It was shocking to discover a smile on her mouth so soon after running for her life. Meat in her stomach, Tusken’s sleepy breathing, and the trees all around filled her with a delicious and rare contentment that made her feel indulgent of Razo, so she said, “It was. And you do keep everyone safe and make everything better.”

“Not always.” He dipped the roasting stick into the flames, and the bits of fat left from the quail sizzled.

She had expected him to agree and preen a bit, and maybe even tell some rousing story of his good deeds in Tira.

“Come now, Razo, what have you ever done that was bad?”

He glanced over his shoulder, the direction they’d left the soldier’s body some hours ago, and his face was tinged with pain. His eyes back to the fire, his voice went soft and simple, as if he were talking to himself.

“It should be a good thing to keep people safe, shouldn’t it? It should be. Except . . .” He stirred the flames with the stick. “I guess I never talked to you about it. At that, I don’t think I’ve talked to Dasha about it, or Finn. Or Enna. Never Enna.

“Well. Near the end of the war with Tira, Enna was dying from the heat of the fire inside her, I could tell that. Finn and I had been prisoners in a Tiran war camp, and everything was bad, bad, bad. The three of us were chasing the Tiran army, which was about to attack the Bayern capital. War was everywhere and nothing could get worse. Nothing seemed to matter except stopping the war, because any moment we would all die or the whole world would just crumple up and fall away. I don’t like thinking back on it. But I do. Think about it. More and more since I met Dasha, for some reason.

“So Enna, Finn, and I were riding after the Tiran army. And we were almost too late.

“The Bayern army met the Tiran in the battlefield, and both sides clashed. It was like banging two rocks together, the way they clashed—loud and hard and doing no good. People started to catch on fire. Is it so much worse in a battle to burn people than to hack them with a sword? That’s

what I can't figure. Death is death, right? It shouldn't be worse. But it was, so much. It was . . . it was bad, Rin."

His eyes flicked to her face then back at the fire. "I knew what was happening. Enna. She was setting them on fire, and they were screaming. The Tiran. She wasn't trying to torture them, she was just killing as many as she could, fast, to end the battle. To end the war. She was trying her best not to—not to let them suffer for long. I believe that. She thought she was doing good. But all those people . . ."

Rin watched him until she could not bear the sight. Razo's curse was to show exactly what he felt in his every expression. What horrors he must have seen. She'd had no idea.

When he spoke again, his voice was pleading, as if she'd accused him of murder and he was desperate to explain. "Back then the Tiran army was trying to kill us. All of us. In their square, they hanged straw men dressed like Isi and Geric—at the first chance, they would've hanged my friends for real, you see? And she'd been through some hell, our Enna had, prisoner to a Tiran captain for months. And he'd been a people-speaker to boot. So the lashing out—I'm not saying it was justified, though maybe it was, I don't know—it was understandable, that much at least."

He took a deep, quavering breath, as if he was at last getting to the spot that stung. "While Enna burned, I stood beside her with my sword and I fought anyone who came her way. Finn and I did. We kept her safe while she burned those soldiers. And I never dare think too hard about it, because if I do, I wonder if I'm responsible too. If what I did, protecting her while she burned, if that means I helped kill them all, if I made a mistake so big that if I even think about it, it'll drag me down and suffocate me.

"Curse it all, there I've gone and thought about it! Why'd I do that? What is it about you, little sister, that makes me think about things I'd happily decided to forget? Curse you and war and everything, but that was a bad, bad time, and sometimes I feel like I'll never crawl out of it."

He wiped savagely at his face, then pushed his fingers into the corners of his eyes to stop the flow of tears. When they slowed, he met her gaze, expectant, pressing his lips together. He needed something from her. This memory of death and burning and guilt had been possessing him for two years—what could she say to all that? She wished that he'd let it stay buried, but the memory, the question, was out now, a bird hatched from an

egg, angry with hunger and screeching. And he was waiting for her to speak, to make it better.

Her belly was full, Tusken was perfect contentment in her arms, the tree at her back stretched between sunlight and soil. Though inside she was still clenched up, flinching away from the idea of people-speaking, the fight in her was ebbing some, and she thought easing Razo's worry might be worth the risk. So she looked inside herself for something honest to say back.

"I'm surprised."

"Surprised that I defended Enna while she burned hundreds of soldiers?"

"Well, no. I'm just surprised that you thought you might've made a mistake."

Razo stared, then slowly his frozen incredulity softened and turned into an almost-smile. "You're yanking my boots now."

"I didn't think you were capable of making a mistake—you've always been the brother who can do no wrong." Though it was just the sort of thing she might say to tease him, she spoke the words earnestly.

Razo grabbed his knees and rocked back, grinning at the canopy. "I'd sock you one for the mean joke, but you're as serious as gravel in my socks, I can tell! You didn't think I was capable? But I'm the biggest . . . How can you have lived with me so many years and say I can do no wrong? Don't you ever listen to what our brothers say?"

"Yes. You're noodle-armed, you're too slow to catch a snail, you're short one leg, two arms, and a brain, you're—"

Razo forcefully cleared his throat. "Just so you know, for the future, that was one of those questions I didn't actually intend for you to answer."

"Anyway, you know the brothers are hard on you because they're jealous."

"Jealous of me."

Rin nodded.

"They're so hard because they're jealous of me. Of how perfect I am. How I can do no wrong."

Rin nodded.

Suddenly Razo was on his feet, moving his legs and back in a jerky motion Rin could only assume was meant to be a dance.

"Jealous of me. Jealous of me. Those big boys are jealous of me." Still not raising his voice above a whisper, he chanted and jigged and shuffled.

“They are, you know. You’re the one who’s traveled and fought and done and seen things, the one who always comes back and brings Ma enough coin to keep us all fed. You’ve always been the clever one, and clearly Ma’s favorite. Of the boys, that is.”

He sat back down, his face all innocent happiness. “I almost believe you, but it doesn’t matter. You thought they were jealous. You thought I could do no wrong. You’re better than roast chicken.”

He smiled at her, so she smiled back, and her smile seemed to please him so much, he grabbed her hand that was not pinned under Tusken and shook it, then knocked her shoulder with his elbow, ruffled her hair, nudged her boots with his, making several small gestures of brotherly approval.

The conversation still felt half-formed, a crescent moon that was aching to wax round, and that empty space bothered her. She realized that despite the crowing and dancing, what he’d done while Enna burned would still bother him. On quiet nights it would sneak up and surprise him with the horrible sting of memory. And with that realization she knew what else to say. Habit bid her clamp down on the words, but her brother’s sorrow made her feel angry and reckless. She let her energy warm in her belly and push the words up her throat and out.

“Razo, you had to protect Enna. She’s your friend, and you were a soldier. She made the decision to do what she did, not you. Even if what she did was wrong, you couldn’t have stopped her, and you certainly couldn’t have stood back and let her be killed. You had to protect her.”

“You think so?” His eyes were so serious, so hopeful. Even though speaking to Razo was almost as easy as talking with a child, it still cost her. Part of her recoiled from the people-speaking, but she fought back, needing to say one more thing to make it just enough.

“I know so. I don’t think you ever need worry about that day again, Razo. You did right.”

He nodded and closed his eyes. No jolting dance this time, no hurrahs and happiness. He put the back of his hand over his eyes and kept nodding, speaking to himself as if to a troubled animal. “Sure enough. That’ll be how it was. No worry now. All right then.”

He took a deep breath and when his hand fell from his face, his expression was calm, even pleased.

He pointed at her. “You’re the one who can do no wrong, Rinna-girl. You’re the family treasure. You’re the reason Ma can keep smiling and none

of our brothers have strangled each other yet and the homestead is the best place in the Forest. You are."

She shook her head, though she wished Razo could make her believe it.

"I want to go home." The idea filled her suddenly with hopeless longing. "I miss the little ones and the Forest, and Ma. Even our brothers. I miss it all."

He nodded. "We'll get you there. Maybe we'll be on our way tomorrow morning. You just stay here with Tusken while I sneak in and make the rescue." When he spoke, his hand strayed to his left side.

Rin glared. "You *are* hiding an injury from me, aren't you? Let me see."

She reached for his tunic, and he pushed her hands away. "It's nothing."

"Then it won't matter if I see."

She lifted his gray soldier's tunic and sucked in a breath at the sight. His entire left side was bruised deep purple, the edges turning green and yellow. Why hadn't she realized before that he was injured? *I could have,* Rin thought. *But I didn't want to notice.* If Razo was hurt, he might not be able to break into the castle, and she so wanted it to be him, not her.

"This is not good," she said.

"It's nothing, really. I tried to escape and one of Selia's soliders hit me."

"With what?"

"His fist." Razo shrugged. "He was a big one."

Rin touched the bruise, and he winced. "Razo, I think your rib is broken."

"No . . ."

"Remember when Deet fell out of a tree? That's how it looked, and he had trouble breathing. I've heard you panting as we run."

"It doesn't matter. Broken or not, I still have to go."

"I'll go." Rin spoke without thinking first, and it made her wonder if that was how everyone lived, talking all the time, speaking words before the thoughts had time to settle. "I'll go to Castle Daire."

Razo stared. "Were you always this eager to rush off after queens and break into fortresses?"

"Tusken needs his ma back. And I think I can do it. Sneak. They won't notice me. I'm a better choice than you."

"Ho there now, I thought you said I was perfect, that I could do no wrong."

Energy was rising up in her, and she knew instinctively she could make her words very convincing. Perhaps that was people-speaking, she thought.

When she got warm inside like that, when words felt tangible before she even uttered them. She took a breath and concentrated on keeping her insides cool and calm. “You should stay with Tusken. Your injury could slow you down. I can sneak right past those guards, tell Isi that you and Tusken are free, and those fire sisters will—”

“Whoa, wait—fire sisters?”

She felt herself blush. “I mean, that’s how I think of Dasha, Isi, and Enna.”

“Fire sisters?” he said again, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged. “It . . . the name sounded good in my head.”

“Uh-huh. All right, go on.”

“So as soon as the . . . the girls know, they’ll be able to break out of the prison, and we’ll come back and find you.”

Razo sat back on his heels and stared up. Rin followed his gaze. The moon was hanging above them, white and ghostly against the blue sky as if anxious to bring on the night. Rin did not share that sentiment. Her hands were tingling cold in anticipation of Razo’s decision. She did not want him to agree. She wanted him to insist that his ribs were fine and she should stay with Tusken. He should not allow his baby sister to endanger herself creeping into a fortress brimming with soldiers and murderous fire-speakers. Even if she did get inside, what could she do if something went wrong?

Then again, what would Razo do? If either of them were caught, it was over. Better he survive. He had Dasha and home—but she had nothing. Her family would not be safe with a people-speaker around. She would risk herself. It was her gift to give.

“I’m almost tempted to agree,” he said at last. “But really, it’s an idea more worthy of our goat-brained Jef than our smart-as-Ma Rin. You stay with Tusken and run to Bayern if I don’t come back.”

She almost did it then. Panic clenched inside her, all her energy gathered together, making fists of need, and she almost punched it all into words and told him, “Let me go, Razo. You’ll be sorry if you don’t. You know you tend to fail with these things even when you’re not injured. You’d be safer with the child. Our brothers are mostly right about you—this is too important to gamble on your meager skills,” and so on, until she’d found the hole in his confidence and tricked him into letting her go instead. The words were there, in her throat, on her tongue, insistent, demanding, real.

She choked, and to keep the greasy black words down, she blurted instead, “I have people-speaking.”

Razo blinked and shook his head as if she’d splashed water in his face. “Wait, whoa, what?”

“I have people-speaking. I’m like Selia.”

“Is this like your bear-speaking joke? Because it really wasn’t funny enough to keep it up.”

She pressed her hands over her eyes. She’d already figured she could not trust herself to return home, but now that Razo knew what she was, that future seemed certain, the idea of home smoke in her hand.

“I’m a people-speaker, like Selia. I’m going to turn into a monster.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, really. I am.”

“Right.”

“Listen to me!” Instead of words, sobs gathered in her throat. “I’ve had people-speaking my whole life. It’s been inside me like . . . like an egg, growing until something foul could eat its way out. I didn’t know what it was, but I always knew there was something wrong in me. With me. And I had to hold it in or I’d hurt people and Ma wouldn’t love me. And now when I talk I’m afraid I’m going to say . . . I’m going to be Selia, I’m going to make people do things, and I can’t be Rin, whoever that is anyway. I can’t speak the thoughts in my head because by the time they reach my tongue they become infected with it, and I’m not sure when I’m speaking casually and when I’m letting that curse taint everything. No one should trust me, I’ll need to be alone and hide away. I hate it. And I hate me.”

She gulped her breath down and shut her mouth. She had not intended to say so much. People-speaking or not, she never should have spoken those last words aloud. Never, not to Razo, not to anyone. That part of her was a tight, ugly clump best left in the dark.

She stared at Razo, her chin trembling with the effort not to cry, terrified that he would acknowledge what she should not have said and try to console her with hollow words.

He was watching the fire burn. It took him a long time to speak, and when he did, his words were measured and slow. “I’m not the smartest boy, I know that. Maybe that’s not such a bad thing—smarts seem like a load of fancy clothes that you have to wear all the time, and they’re heavy and rip easily even though you’re supposed to keep them clean. A hassle, that’s

what that is. So I'm not so smart, and I can't say whether or not you have people-speaking, but one thing I know"—he looked at her, his eyes golden in the light—"you're nothing like Selia, and you're never going to be."

Rin laughed without humor and pulled her knees up, resting her forehead so Razo would not have to look at his sister's face.

His voice got hotter. "No, you listen to me now, Rinna-girl. You're never going to be. Never. Selia's the queen of Kel, is she? She's so smart and powerful and can just lock up Dasha and Isi and Enna, can she? Ha! She's a grunting piglet. And if it came down to a fight, you and Selia, I'd bet the last tree that you'd win without ever opening your mouth. Because you're Forest born, Rinna-girl."

Rin was crying then, so she kept her face down, hoping Razo would not notice.

Razo cleared his throat. "See? I know you believe you have people-speaking, but you haven't tried to talk me into sending you to the castle. You wouldn't do that,'cause you're Rin. I'm your favorite brother and not so dumb for being not too smart, and I say, go on and rescue those girls. Show that Selia what it means to be Agget-kin."

She looked up then. "You're going to let me go?"

"No chance you'd ask if you didn't think you could do it. I don't like sitting here while you go off asking danger for an evening stroll. I think my sneaking skills are rather impressive and I enjoyed the idea of bursting into the prison and shouting, 'Tusken's safe, my girls. Break out of that stone box!' And Dasha rushing up to me and kissing me and—well, anyway, I think my plan sounds like more fun, but you wouldn't insist if you didn't mean it, and besides, you did manage to get away last night without being seen, and you were right about keeping us hidden in that tree. And if nothing else, Tusken's probably safest with me."

She nodded. Her middle relaxed in relief, even though the thought of stealing into that castle alone made her feel iced over.

"You *can* do this, right?" he asked.

She nodded again and thought, *Razo and Tusken will stay safe. I'll only have to risk myself.*

"All right." He rubbed his hands together and his tone became as serious as she'd ever heard out of his mouth. "You should head out in about two hours. There's only one entrance through the castle wall, and it'll be well

guarded. I was going to try and scale the wall—you think you can manage that?"

Cold dripped over the skin of her back and down her arms. Could she? She'd try. If she could only get close enough to the girls to shout the news, then it would all be worth it. Rin nodded.

Razo sucked air in through his teeth. "I don't know, Rin . . ."

"I can, Razo. No problem. Really. I'm Forest born, aren't I?" He was not going to let her go. She scrambled for something else to say. "Besides, I have tree-speaking, so that will help."

"Oh, right, I didn't think about that. Good."

Would it help? She wondered if her knowledge of tree-speaking somehow endowed her to be better at sneaking, if it was just a matter of practice, or if she was just so boring no one noticed her. But tree-speaking was not like fire-speaking, not a weapon to be used. Isi said animals were living things and could not be controlled, not like fire or wind. Trees were living things too. She could not make them do things they would not normally do.

Razo was scratching a map of the castle in the dirt. "Castle Daire is a five-tower structure—a central tower with four towers around it. Once inside the wall, you'll see a main entrance into the central tower. It's nicely guarded, so I'd planned to find an entrance through one of the side towers. If there's a kitchen in one, it'll have its own little door—look for smoke or smell for grease. If they keep pigs, they'll be housed near the kitchen since pigs eat the scraps and bits. I've had pretty good luck getting in and out of kitchens. Once inside the side tower, you should be able to get into the central tower. Take the stairs down and you'll find the dungeon right enough. That's where Selia put me and Tusk, so I guess she'd put the girls there too. All you'll have to do is speak the words 'Tusken is safe' and the girls should do the rest. Now, are you really sure you can do this? That you want to do this?"

She was not so sure at all that she could, and she definitely did not want to. But worse would be waiting in the wood for days, not knowing if Razo was killed. Worse would be the searchers coming upon her and Tusken without Razo and his sling there to protect them. Worse would be hearing that Isi was killed because Rin had been too afraid. Besides, Selia would never endanger herself to save her friends, Rin was sure. And it felt very good to do the opposite of what Selia would do.

Rin nodded, and made her expression brave. She'd wanted to see if going out in the world could change her as it had changed Razo, if following Isi could make her more like the queen. Now it was time to leave the wood. No matter that Rin felt made of paper. She would see it through.

Chapter 20

The sun was scraping the western curve of the sky when Tusken woke from his nap. Rin shouldered her pack, now slightly heavier with the roots and nuts she and Razo had gathered throughout the day.

"Win go?" Tusken asked.

She nodded. "I'll be back."

"I go." Tusken held up his arms. "I go, Win. I go."

"You'll stay with me, little man," said Razo. "We've got games to play."

Rin was on her knees, hugging Tusken. "Razo will keep you safe. I'll see you soon. And I'll bring your ma too," she added recklessly. She looked at Razo, who was burying the remains of their fire. "If I'm not back the day after tomorrow—"

"We'll inch our way to Bayern and send a message to Geric."

"And not try to come after me?"

Razo groaned but nodded. "Tusken's life is first priority. Don't worry about us, little sister. You just stay safe yourself. And when you see Dasha, tell her . . . tell her . . ."

His brow furrowed.

"They're smart," Rin said, echoing his earlier words. *They'll keep themselves nice and safe. They'd better.* "Two days."

Razo took Tusken's hand, and the little boy waved goodbye to Rin until she was out of sight.

"Keep him safe," Rin whispered. "Be safe, both of you."

She walked as quickly as her trembling legs would take her. Wound with worry and aching for the peace of trees, she kept one hand outstretched and let her fingers glance off trunks in passing. She tried to imagine how they were murmuring of deep water, the satisfaction when the roots were nestled in good soil, the urgings to dig ever deeper, the peaceful swaying of leaves as they rested in dim light, waiting for the sun to return again. She tried to pull that peace inside her and let it strengthen her core, imagined it surrounding her like the toughest bark, making her strong and fearless.

The afternoon cooled, and she could not hear anything over the crackling and clicking of cicadas, the storm of rasps and croaks. The wood teemed

with insects so noisy her ears rang, though she could not see a one. What else was out there that she could not see?

She had to hurry, directing herself by slant of sunlight. Twice she thought she heard the rhythm of hoofbeats or footfalls, so she hid, then ran, losing time and direction. So little sleep, so much toil was wearing her down. When she began to stumble more than step, she stopped for a rest, curling herself into the leggy roots of a large tree, feeling as tiny and vulnerable as she had as a little girl climbing onto her mother's lap.

Evening sunlight grazed through the canopy, slashing at an angle into her eyes. She closed them, just for a minute, just to hide from the brightness.

Rin startled and opened her eyes.

Darkness. She felt odd, as if someone had dropped a heavy blanket over her head, and she could barely see or move. Her arms ached, her face was sore from pressing against the bark of the tree, her legs were cold from being scrunched up beneath her. She moved. That hurt. She sat upright, stretching her legs, and felt the painful pricking of blood rush through her. The lack of light was confusing and frightening. If she did not ache everywhere, she would have feared she was dead.

An owl called a warning, and only then did Rin understand that the world was dark because it was night. She had fallen asleep.

"No," she said. "No, no, no."

She lurched to her feet and began to run, her body still waking up, her legs feeling like straw sacks. It was not long before she admitted that she had no idea where she was going. She tripped, felt against a tree, and stayed there, breathing hard.

Stop it, she scolded herself, taking her ma's tone. *Calm down and do what you need to do.*

She did not have time to panic. The girls were locked up. Razo had bet on her to succeed. Maybe it was not too late to find her way to night, if she could just think it through.

She found herself remembering another time she'd been lost in a wood. After Nordra and the stick, after Ma had turned her back, seven-year-old Rin had gotten lost. That was the first time she'd opened herself to listen to the trees. After, she'd known her way home.

Rin wrapped her arms around the tree, closing her eyes and resting her head against its smooth bark. She did not demand of the tree what she wanted, as she had after Wilem. That was foolish, she realized now. And tree-speaking was an odd phrase anyhow—it was more like tree-listening. She could not tell the trees anything, only think through their calmness to understand her own thoughts better.

Her breathing slowed, she entered into the greenness, or perhaps it entered her, and there in the tree's depths she met again the tightening fear that she was a people-speaker.

Enough. She'd had enough of being chased away by what she'd done to Wilem and she felt angry enough to chew a stone to dust. *I know I'm bad. This can't shock me anymore. I need to do this task, and I need to be calm and able to think. I need a way to find where I'm going.*

Ignoring her own circling thoughts, she focused on the tree. With no sunlight to lure the tree up, the leaves curled slightly for the night, the center of the tree pulled downward. Her thoughts followed that motion into the roots, thousands of tips that touched other roots, leading to another tree, and another, the trees of the wood connected as if holding hands.

Her mind burned, her heart raced. All those trees, all connected. She followed the net of roots, finding a place where the trees stopped.

There. That was her direction, she hoped.

She had opened her eyes and was just about to push herself away from the tree when a horse cantered by.

Rin froze, not moving, her body still tight to the tree. The horse stopped. She closed her eyes and waited, her arms shaking in the effort to hold still.

Please, please, please . . .

The sound of hoofbeats continued on.

After that, she traveled cautiously, scurrying from tree to tree, weaving her way to avoid detection. When she discovered a spring, she took a little damp earth and packed it into her ears. The sounds of the night wood dimmed, and she missed the vibrant rattle of crickets, but she hoped the precaution would save her from the danger of Selia's voice.

Twice she scrambled up a tree to get out of the way of horse men galloping toward the castle. Once she dropped to the ground, huddled behind a trunk, as two soldiers passed by heading east. She inched closer and closer, until at last there was the castle. She could see the gates now, and she moaned at the sight, thinking she might as well try to swallow a

pumpkin whole as get inside. The gates were shut. She'd fostered a delirious hope that she could sneak inside without trying to scale the wall, but that hope withered away.

Keeping her distance, Rin made her way around the castle, searching for a spot where she could climb. Soldiers moved everywhere like ants crawling over dropped meat. Her heart was thudding so hard it made her head hurt.

Calm, she told herself. *Be calm.* But just the narrowest thought of trying to scramble up those sheer walls under sight of armed sentries made her nearly whimper in fear. After circling the perimeter, she retreated into the trees. She'd taken herself so far the castle was out of sight before she realized that she was running away.

Rin climbed a tree, wrapped an arm around the trunk, and whispered to the tree, to the night, to herself, "Please. I need to do this. I need some courage. I need to bring Tusken his mother and keep Razo safe. And I need to believe I can do something of my own, because Razo's the only one who does."

The reality of her situation came down on her like a hard rain. She had to get in to night. It would be a three-hour walk at least to get back to Razo and Tusken, and no chance Razo would send her back a second time. He would wait for the next night, then try to scale those impossible walls, an easy target for a crossbow. And in the meantime, what would happen to the girls? No, to night. It had to be.

Anxiety was taking her farther away. Rin closed her eyes and opened herself inside, listening to the tree. For the first time in months, the dark remnant of the Wilem memory did not accost her. Instead, she was buoyed and floating on ideas of rain and soil, warm air hovering on a leaf. Soothed, she focused her thoughts into the first soft layer that ran with sap, down into the roots, and then out.

It was like a game, letting her thoughts pump through the network of roots and trees, her trail a dizzying maze of growth. Following the lattice of roots, she hunted for trees near the wall, hoping to approach the castle under shadow of the wood.

There she found a bundle of roots hunkered down under stone. Long ago, someone must have axed its trunk to make way for the wall, but the roots survived, sending up shoots, unfurling new, thin leaves to wave at the sun.

Years upon years its shoots were cut away, but it lived on, and slowly its growth eased rocks loose, cracked mortar, made room to stretch.

Rin opened her eyes. A tree might have opened a hole in the wall.

She'd felt safe for the moment, and exposing herself again to the night was almost painful. But she kept breathing, and picturing herself in the tree, imagining that she was that peaceful, with roots deep and branches high. And the panic held off for the moment, as if she were tucked away in her ma's house with the shutters closed against a storm.

She approached the back side of the wall from the northeast along a worn footpath. Guards walked the battlements, looking out. If they spotted her, she hoped a lone girl approaching from the direction of town would not warrant much suspicion.

Two guards met in the middle of the wall and spoke a few words, then turned their backs to each other and ambled forward, their eyes looking out. *Now*, Rin thought. *Go now!* She hesitated, then stumbled forward, took a deep-as-knees breath, and forced each foot to feel the ground beneath her before letting her weight pull herself forward. Best to be quiet, best not to draw notice, to be slow and easy as if she were nothing but a shadow.

"A night forest dreaming," she whispered to herself. "Nothing to ponder but years and rain."

She felt so aware of everything, the stick that might snap beneath her foot, the breeze about to rustle some leaves. The walk seemed to take days, but she reached the wall before the guards turned back again. She pressed herself against the stones, allowing herself now to shudder, cold prickles of sweat trickling along her neck and back.

She dropped to her knees and found it—a very old tree, its stubborn roots still living, still growing, right through the wall. Rin yanked out a few stones, pushed her pack in before her, and crawled through, shoulders and hips scraping rock.

The castle courtyard was empty and dark and gray, a hollow skull. No cover, no trees to hide beneath. She sat by the arching roots of the old tree and listened to its thrumming thoughts, trying to pull that peace inside her. The tree did not mind that its trunk had been cut away, that it was not tall and beautiful as it once had been. It was still alive, and it would just keep on drinking water through its roots and shooting out new leaves as long as it could. The rhythm of water and sap, soil and growth circled through. Rin hummed it to herself like a song.

“Deep water flowing,” she whispered. “Leaves curled and resting under the moon.”

Her pace was casual, her steps quiet. She kept breathing, kept that silent hum rumbling through her, kept her body relaxed, walking along the inside of the wall, passing a stable, until the five joined towers of the castle were before her. But first she had to go around the garrison. Through the open doors and windows she could see the building was stuffed with soldiers, many spending the night on the floor. Others slept on the ground outside, while those awake sat playing quiet games of stones.

Move like you belong, she reminded herself. *Like you couldn’t sleep and came out for the privy. Nothing to worry. No trouble at all.*

No one stopped her. She was in the moon shadow of the castle now.

She followed pig prints to one of the four smaller towers. Just as Razo had said, there was smoke on the air and a pile of kitchen scraps emitting rot.

And there was laundry drying on a line.

She slipped between two lines of laundry, stripped out of her Bayern travel clothes, and pulled on a white shift in the Kelish style with sleeves dangling from her forearms. Over that she donned a yellow sleeveless dress, tightening the lacing at the bodice. They were both a little short and the dangling sleeves felt cumbersome. She pulled a string loose from the hem of her discarded tunic to tie back her hair, then hid the dirty bundle under a slop bucket.

The kitchen door was narrow and low, meant to discourage invaders, she figured. It was also unlocked. Rin stooped and ducked inside. The kitchen fires were banked, and children her age and younger slept on the floor, waiting for dawn and the work day to begin. She tiptoed around their bodies and ducked through another door where the wall was as thick as her leg was long. Now she was in the large open chamber of the central tower. It was adorned as a banquet hall, with long wooden tables still scattered with the remnants of dinner. In the center of the chamber, stairs wound to the upper floors and deeper into the ground. She was so close. Over to her right was the huge wood door to the castle, shut and bolted, a dozen soldiers on the inside, standing, yawning, slumping. Her body yearned to hide, but she forced herself to keep moving casually through the chamber toward the stairway.

Someone was coming down the stairs—a thick woman with a square face, wearing a long-sleeved gray tunic with draping sleeves. Instead of a sleeveless dress over the tunic, she sported leggings like Kelish men. Around the hem of the tunic and sleeve, a pattern was worked in orange and red thread, loops with pointed tips. *Flames,* Rin realized. The woman was staring at her.

The stairs were there. There. Rin tried to lift her foot, to walk that insignificant length, to disappear into the darkness below. But the stare of that woman held her. Sweat was thick on Rin's forehead, itching down her back, across the palms of her hands. *I'm nothing, nothing, don't look at me. Please. I'm nothing.*

The way her mouth opened suddenly, the woman might have gasped, though with the mud in her ears Rin could not be sure. She flew to Rin, seizing her wrist. Rin made a small noise of pain.

The woman's voice was loud enough to push through the mud, though Rin did not understand the questions in Kelish. Rin thrashed and squirmed and tried to get free, but the woman's hand was strong. One of the guards charged forward, hefting his sword.

Rin grabbed the woman around the middle and pushed her hard to the ground. Though large, the woman was soft and awkward, and Rin managed to put her foot on the woman's throat and twist out of her hold in a dirty move forbidden at the homestead. But she was free, and she darted for the stairs, pulling in air to shout to the fire sisters and hope her voice carried. All she had time for was one breath before hands were on her, yanking her arms behind her back. The force of her capture knocked the wind from her chest, and she could not squeak a word.

It had been a desperate move anyhow. No chance she could have made it far. The horror of her failure engulfed her.

They took her pack and tied her hands. The woman noticed the mud crammed in her ears and scraped it out with her fingers.

She said something in Kelish that sounded like a question, and when Rin did not respond, she switched to the Bayern tongue. "Why putting dirt in the ears?"

One of the soldiers looked uneasy, speaking in Kelish and gesturing to Rin and toward the wood outside the castle walls.

The woman shushed him. "The queen asking questions next. You answering."

She had the soldiers drag Rin farther from the way to the dungeon, then ran up the steps to the higher levels of the keep.

The sweat that lay over Rin's face and under her tunic felt freezing cold, and she shivered. She thought if she could just see the soldiers' faces, perhaps she could figure out how to trick them into letting her go. But they held her arms at an angle, her back hunched so she could not twist enough to see. Her mouth was as dry as a fallen leaf, everything seemed hopeless. And Selia was coming.

Chapter 21

Rin heard the Kelish woman's voice echoing down the stairs before she emerged, a shivering circle of candlelight descending before her.

"I not noticing her at first. I was seeing of her heat before seeing of her, Your Majesty."

Then, a second voice—Selia's. "What an enchanting mystery! Do you think we should keep her alive to figure it out? Or shall we kill her now?"

"She could be dangerous."

"Mmm."

The candlelight grew brighter, then in the circle of light Selia emerged from the stairs, flanked by the woman and two other men, also dressed in gray tunics with orange markings. Over her white nightgown, Selia wore a red velvet robe, the color of a very ripe berry, and her dark yellow hair was long and loose. Selia stepped daintily off the last stair, took in Rin with the soldiers, and smiled. Rin could not help thinking her lovely.

"My wonderful guards!" Selia extended her arms, as if embracing the soldiers from a distance. "Flann, Imchad, Conall—you are so fine, so strong. What good work you do keeping my little home safe. How I adore you!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty," each one mumbled in voices that sounded sheepish bordering on lovesick. The other soldiers who remained at the gate watched intensely. A few shuffled closer, their faces eager, as if hoping Selia might notice them next. But her generous smile had turned to the woman beside her.

"And beautiful Nuala. Ever watchful, always brilliant. Your days of going unnoticed are long forgotten. You shine like a full moon."

Nuala bowed her head, red flush smeared over her broad cheeks.

Now Selia's eyes turned to Rin. Her gaze was uncomfortable, probing, and Rin flinched under it.

"Nuala, why are her ears smeared with dirt?"

"She had putting mud in her ears, Your Majesty. I cannot know why."

Rin thought Selia's followers must not realize the power of their mistress's voice.

Selia's eyebrows rose. "She did? Well, maybe she's a clever thing. Are you clever?"

Rin summoned all her strength and sent it into words. "Let me go."

Selia's eyes opened wide in pure surprise. "Pardon me?"

"You want something from Isi, from the *Crown Princess*." Rin fought to speak with confidence, to shine up her words and offer them like coins. But her chin trembled, and she was so aware of her own worthlessness she could barely squeak. "I can't give you what you want. You should let me go. I have nowhere to run. There's no point in keeping me around, just another mouth to feed. You'd feel so much better if you let me go."

Selia stared, then she leaned her head back and laughed. "Wonderful! So charming. It appears I have a little sister in talent. But is that your best effort, truly? How sad. Let me guess—you were afraid of yourself all your life, so you did not practice your skills; you shut them away. And now you are useless. Yes, Nuala, this one is terribly dangerous—if you are a beetle underfoot." Selia's smile was barely a twitch, yet it seemed the cruelest smile Rin had ever seen.

"She is not a threat?" Nuala asked, watching Rin with wary eyes.

"No, she is weak."

Rin shuddered. Never had any words seemed more true.

Then Selia's eyes softened, the cold smile melted from her lips. Her face was all benevolence. Even as Rin guessed that it was just another mask, a new tactic, the effect was profound, and she found herself thinking, *I wish I'd had a chance to wash before meeting her. I wish I looked a bit nicer. What can I say to make her like me?*

"I know who you are, Rin. Cilie has told me many charming stories. Eager to know you better, I was thrilled to learn you had escorted my old mistress to my home. So you may imagine my worry when I realized you were not among the girls. But all is as it should be again. You were so clever! We looked and looked for the longest time but could not find any trace of you and dear sweet Tusken. Truly ingenious. How did you elude my searchers?"

Rin blinked long and hard. She wanted to tell Selia. She should just tell her. Did it really matter if Selia knew about sleeping in the oak tree, or even about the tree-speaking? Surely she was about to kill Rin anyway. But there remained a thin, tough core in Rin's middle, pulled securely up toward the

sky, down toward earth, and there within that single fiber, she could still think a little. *Keep silent, Rin.* At least she had some practice at that.

"Come now," said Selia. "None of it matters anymore. I just admire your competence." She studied Rin's face, lifting a finger to stroke her cheek. "No one appreciates you properly, do they? Your family? Yes, they do not see the true Rin, the clever Rin, the powerful Rin. Overlooked your entire life, tossed aside as if you were no more than any scrap of a girl. They don't know what secrets you hold, how you have fought to keep those secrets, all you have sacrificed to keep your family safe. And for what? For negligence? For dismissal? The way you have been treated is shocking."

Rin felt as if she could curl up at Selia's feet and fall asleep. Her thoughts relaxed too, drifting away from her control. *Selia would understand me. She and I have grown up with the same plague inside. She could teach me, and in turn I could help her change her ways. Only she could really understand . . .*

"I bet there are stories you could tell! I am near breathless in anticipation. Tell me. Tell me all of it, all the clever things you can do. How did you get them away without drawing notice? What did you do next?"

Selia put a finger under Rin's jaw and gazed lovingly into her eyes. Rin's legs trembled with eagerness to speak, her stomach tossed with joy. How wonderful it would feel to tell Selia about her sneaking, half in the green world, and her idea to hide in the very tree that held the cage. Selia would be delighted! Rin could see the path they had taken in her mind, their flight north, then east, and north again. *Silence, Rin. Keep silent*. The room seemed to tilt to one side; her head hurt. Maybe she could draw Selia a map . . . *No!* Why was everything so confusing? She tried to think like a tree, hide herself inside that wonderful bark of thought, sink deep in a sturdy trunk, close herself to all this confusion.

"You are fighting so hard!" Selia said. "That is sweet. You must think you have someone to protect, but there is no need. You should protect yourself now, and the way to do that is to speak. You are so good at speaking, better than you can even guess. No need to close yourself up any longer, little flower. Open yourself, claim yourself. Speak."

Rin wanted to, she really wanted to. But a tickly bug of an idea was irritating her, distracting her—Selia understood her. That meant that Rin's ability to read people was part of the people-speaking. When she guessed Ma's thoughts before Ma spoke them, that was people-speaking. When she

detected the lie in Cilie's face, that too. And finding just the right thing to say to Wilem to keep him from running off with the boys. The ability to read people, know what they needed to hear, convince them to do as she wished. All of that. People-speaking.

Selia could see thoughts in people's faces, could read in their expressions what they wanted to hear, and told it to them. But the way Selia spoke was beyond finding the words to convince Nordra to give up the stick—Selia's words were webbing, thick and sticky, that clung and enshrined. Selia's words were weapons. Beside her, Rin felt weak as pudding.

"I have nothing worth saying," Rin muttered, and felt it was true.

Selia sighed. "Oh well, I was just curious. It does not matter now that I have the boy prince safely home with me."

Rin heard the gasp before realizing that it had escaped from her own throat.

Selia tilted her head, studying Rin's face, her expression amused surprise. "Oh my, you did not know that, did you? You thought Tusken and his little soldier friend were still out there somewhere? Look at her, Nuala, she is utterly shocked. She's trying to hide it, poor dear. And here we all assumed she broke into the castle in some fanciful attempt to rescue him!"

She smiled again at Rin. "Forgive me. I should show more compassion. If you did not know, then . . . Well, I hope it won't come as a dreadful blow when I tell you that when my guards found the boy prince and his companion, they tried to flee, the poor dears, as if they had anything to fear from me! In the tussle, the dark-haired boy died. He tried to fight, but what good is a sling against a sword, especially with his boots on fire?"

Rin was on the floor. She did not think she had sat down, but suddenly the ground was there under her hand and backside, her body jarred as if she'd hit it hard.

"Did you know that boy?" Selia's voice dripped with concern. "I had no idea or I would have taken more care. My condolences, truly. I have lost loved ones too, and I know the pain. The deep, deep pain. But in good news"—her tone brightened—"the little one lives in excellent health! He is back in his aunt Selia's adoring arms. I have dressed him in silks and he sleeps upon feather pillows, his chubby little face still smeared with the honey sweets I fed him for dinner. Cilie is with him, my faithful lady-in-waiting, but he is most fond of me."

Razo is dead, Rin was thinking. It was all she could think. The thought crowded her head, her body, filled the room like smoke from a clogged chimney, and Rin could not breathe through it. *Razo is dead, and it's my fault. I failed him, I killed him. I fell asleep and lost all that time. The searchers found them, killed my brother, carried Tusken back to Selia. All while I slept. He's dead, it's my fault. I insisted on going myself, and now he's dead.*

Selia crouched beside her and placed something small and cold in Rin's hands. Her face was close to Rin's, so close she found herself watching Selia's pale eyelashes as she blinked.

"Tell the Crown Princess to name me the ruler of Bayern's eastern provinces. It *is* delightful to be a queen by marriage, but I'd so much rather have some land in my name. My provinces will still be part of Bayern. I'm not asking for the *crown*, after all. The eastern provinces aren't too much to exchange for the life of her child, are they? No, you agree. That would be greedy of her. And I will be a good ruler, and tie the kingdom of Bayern even more snugly to Kel. It will be a marvelous political alliance with both sides benefiting richly. I do not ask for something impossible, just a little piece of land, won fairly in this war game. All I require is her signature on a letter to Geric. He will honor what his wife signs, as long as I send it back with his son intact. If she refuses, I will keep Tusken as my own. I have always wanted a son. I do not think that will transpire—I believe the Crown Princess will sign, and then she will remain my guest until the king follows through on the transfer of land. Once that happens, everyone goes home hale and healthy! You see how reasonable I am."

Rin was nodding. She did not care about any of it—eastern provinces, political alliances. Trying to take it in felt like drinking dust. Razo should have come, not her. All along, she'd known she would fail, and sure enough, here she sat on a stone floor drowning under the news of her brother's death. But she nodded.

"Good. Very good. My hearth-watchers," Selia said, gesturing to the men and women in gray tunics, "will escort you downstairs to your companions. I apologize for the rough quarters, but alas, Castle Daire is not so grand as to boast of large guest chambers! Still, the sooner the Crown Princess signs her agreement, the sooner I can send that sweet little baby back to his father. Off you go, and tell the Crown Princess I will call on her tomorrow."

"She's a queen," Rin whispered.

Selia had begun to walk away, but she stopped where she stood, her smile rigid. “What did you say?”

Rin could not believe she had spoken at all. The words had slipped out; she had barely noticed them. Now she had to gather any energy left in her body to speak again, forcing the words out in a croak. “Isi. You call her Crown Princess. But she’s a queen.”

The change in Selia’s face was astonishing. Her composure, her beauty disappeared as her face stiffened and turned red, her eyes glaring, her mouth quivering. Rin recoiled, sure the woman would strike. But just as suddenly, Selia’s face calmed again, though now no smile graced her lips.

“All of this can end very well for you. How would you like to be the one to accompany the child back to his father? Yes, I can see that you genuinely care for him. You would love to be so honored, to have his well-being in your hands. You could keep him safe. If the *Crown Princess* signs that document, you will be taking the little prince home tomorrow. And then I will not have a reason to cut your throat and toss you over the wall. Think on that. Come, Nuala.”

Selia climbed the winding stairs, Nuala following. Selia’s remaining hearth-watchers, those in the gray tunics embroidered with orange flames, took Rin by the elbows and walked her swiftly down steps so steep Rin feared she would drop to the bottom if she leaned forward just a bit. That was where she’d been trying to go all along, and now they took her willingly. Because it did not matter anymore. Rin had no good news to shout, and the fire sisters would not break free.

For some reason she was having trouble seeing. The torches on the walls swam with indistinct light, the steps beneath her feet seemed to curve and bulge. Only when she blinked and felt coolness streak down her cheeks did she understand that she’d been seeing through tears.

From the hiccups in her chest and the shake of her shoulders, Rin guessed she was crying hard, though a numbness consumed her so she was scarcely aware of her sobs. By the time the hearth-watchers unlocked a heavy metal door and pushed her through, she was nearly blind with tears. The room was completely black and stank like a privy hole.

She stumbled forward, and hands were on her at once, comforting hands. Rin kneeled, then crumpled, stone beneath her arms and head.

“What’s happened, Rinna?” It was Dasha’s voice. She was stroking Rin’s hair back from her forehead, and Enna and Isi were rubbing her back,

grasping her hands, their touch desperate to ease what ever might be her pain. Rin covered her face with her hands. She had no right to their comfort when it was her fault.

"Razo's dead," she said through the sobs. The hands touching her stopped, frozen by her words. She forced herself to keep talking. "I got Razo and Tusken out of the cage. I . . . I left them in the wood. To come tell you that Selia didn't have Tusken so you could break out. But Selia's searchers found them. They . . . they killed Razo and took Tusken again."

That was all Rin could say for some time, but she did not need to talk. The three girls were sitting and lying beside her, holding one another, weeping, their arms and legs and hair tangled like the roots of close trees, sobs shaking them like leaves in a high wind.

For hours perhaps they lay there crying. Sometimes Rin noticed that her knees hurt on the stone floor or that her throat ached with thirst, but otherwise she felt a catastrophic numbness. She was aware of herself as if from a distance, watching and wondering how that girl Rin could cry so hard and not break apart.

"Rin," Isi said when she could speak again. "How was Tusken?"

Rin nodded, swallowing until she could find her voice. "He was happy. Playing with Razo."

"Good." Isi exhaled the word. "All right. That's . . ." Her voice caught and she stopped talking.

Rin was still clutching something in her fist, and she rubbed it between her fingers to see what Selia had placed there—a bead. Tusken used to wear it around his neck on a leather band. That proof of the boy's capture cut through the numbness and jabbed at Rin's heart, and she grimaced with the pain, an audible moan escaping her throat.

"She says she wants to send Tusken home." Rin told them of Selia's offer to let Rin take Tusken back to his father as soon as Isi signed her document.

"Was she sincere, Rin?" Isi asked. "Will she let Tusken go if I sign?"

Rin blinked, realizing that Isi wanted to know if she had detected truth or lie in Selia's face. "I'm not sure. I wasn't thinking. I wasn't watching her clearly. I'm sorry."

"Why the eastern provinces?" asked Dasha. Rin could not see her expression in the darkness, but there was a dry rasp to her throat.

Isi could only whisper. "If the king of Bayern were to die without a direct heir, the rulers of each province would vote to select a new monarch for the

kingdom. The eastern provinces combined into one body would be the largest. If she convinced two other rulers to stand with her, then her vote would become the majority, and I can guess who she would select for the post. So. She plans to kill me. She most likely *would* return Tusken to Geric, but I can't imagine she'd leave them alone. Somehow, she'd find a way to kill them as well—but not through war, I think. Kel is not strong enough to invade Bayern."

"I don't understand that woman," said Dasha. "She had Tusken. Why lure you here as well? Why not just send you word of Tusken's kidnapping along with her demands?"

"She's crazy." Enna's voice was so full of sorrow, Rin scarcely recognized it.

Yes, Selia might be crazy, but Rin remembered her face and words the night before as she gloated, Razo and Tusken in the cage. Had it only been one day? To Rin it felt like weeks. "More than anything, she wants Isi to see her victory. Last night she was so happy Isi was there, she couldn't stop talking. I don't think she meant to talk that much. She couldn't help herself. Winning isn't enough—she wants to win in front of Isi."

Isi moaned. "I think you're right, Rin. Save us all, I think that's it."

"Cilie is here," Rin said. "Watching Tusken. She's Selia's lady-in-waiting."

Isi nodded. "Of course, and what a lovely irony—betrayed by another lady-in-waiting. Selia knew if some poor girl came to me with a story of abuse and abandonment, I'd take her in. Fool that I am. That will be how she gets to Geric and Tusken after my death—she'll get her followers into the palace. Geric and Tusken will be under constant threat of poisoning or accidents."

"And if they die," said Dasha, "Selia will become queen of Bayern."

Rin remembered the coldness in Selia's eyes when she spoke of taking Tusken as her own son, the delight she took in imagining Isi's pain. That little boy who loved to discover fat snails stuck to the undersides of leaves and holes in the shrubs perfect for climbing through—he was in that woman's clutches. He saw Razo die, and now he was alone and terrified. Rin's chest clenched.

"I want to kill her," said Enna. Despite the fierce crying of the past hour, her voice turned hard. "I want to kill her, Isi. Sometimes killing is justified, isn't it? I wish I didn't . . . I wish. But Selia is Selia, and she killed Razo,

and I want to—" Above their heads, a ball of fire popped, briefly illuminating the cell, four walls of stone and a heap of straw in the corner. The light extinguished, leaving behind a scratch of smoke in the darkness.

"Tomorrow," said Isi. "I'll talk to her tomorrow. I'll figure it out, Enna, and you won't have to kill her. Because if she touches one hair on my boy's head"—Isi paused as if trying to find enough breath to speak—"then she'll answer to me."

It must have been day by then, but it still seemed to be night in that dark room below the castle. Crying had made Rin's eyes sting, her body throb, and she lay side by side with the fire sisters. She was not sure whose arm was on hers or whose hair tickled her face, but there was an exhausted relief just to be close, and she slept a little.

Hours later, the shaky glow of a torch peeped through the door's small, barred window. One of the hearth-watchers appeared—a middle-aged man with an uneven beard and shifting eyes.

"Crown—," he began, then changed his mind. "Bayern queen, Her Highness Queen Selia asking for you. You for coming alone."

Isi sat up, her arms resting on her upright knees. "I want to see my son."

"I for taking you. The queen will deciding." He put such emotion into the word "queen" that Rin knew he was in love with Selia.

For a few moments, Isi did not move, but when she rose, it was with purpose. Enna stood beside her.

"I'll go with you."

The hearth-watcher shook his head. "Alone, the queen is saying."

"I'll be all right," Isi said, low enough that her voice did not carry through the door. "She doesn't want me dead—yet. I've still some value until the land matters are settled. If I can talk to her, maybe I can find out more about Tusken, bargain a way to see him. If I can just see him, I think I can take care of her fire-speakers and get Tusken safe."

"Let me go with you, Isi." Enna was pleading now. "I can do better against her this time, I know I can. Please. I don't want you alone with that viper."

"I think it's better that way, Enna. If you or anyone else comes too, Selia might use you to get to me. She'd threaten you, hurt you, and she knows I couldn't stand it. For now, she needs me, but to her, you three are expendable."

As expendable as Razo, Rin thought.

“If she sends food to you, don’t eat it,” Isi went on. “And the moment you get word that Tusken is safe, don’t hesitate—get out any way you can.”

Rin shook her head. Strong as Isi was, Rin was not so sure she could withstand Selia’s assault.

“Still, Isi,” said Enna, squinting at the door. “I don’t like the thought of you without a friend at your side. I don’t trust her.”

Isi forced a casual expression. “Who, Selia? Come on, she’s a pussycat. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Enna stared back at her, and then at once they both laughed. It was so sudden, and yet sincere, Rin wondered if the darkness of the dungeon had already turned them mad. But there was a light in their eyes, an intelligence, that made her believe they laughed because they needed to.

Enna shook her head. “Send her my warmest regards, and if the opportunity presents itself, I mean my very *warmest* regards.”

The sound of the laugh stirred something in Rin. Her core firmed, and she felt a surge of hope. So when Isi rose to the door, Rin sprang up beside her.

“Where is Tusken?” Rin demanded of the man—a hearth-watcher, she saw by his clothing. “Tell me where she’s got Tusken.”

The hearth-watcher shook his head, his expression startled.

“Tell me where Tusken is,” said Rin again, finding any energy inside her and pushing it into words. She was flailing, she knew, but she had to try. The man just kept shaking his head, so Rin tried, “Let us all out. Don’t take Isi to Selia—take her out of the castle. Let her go into the wood. Get Tusken and let him go too. Let us all go.”

The man’s eyes narrowed at Rin. “The queen waiting,” he said with malice. Again, from the way he spoke of the queen, she could see the adoration quivering in his expression. This was a man who would die for his mistress, and she guessed he was so full of Selia’s voice, Rin’s weak whimpering could not tempt him away. She had no other solution, no way to save Isi or Tusken, no idea at all. Sadness doused her, and buried under thoughts of Razo she crumpled to the floor.

Dasha and Enna seemed confused by Rin’s outburst, but Isi whispered, “Thanks for trying, Rin.” To Enna she said, “Keep them safe,” and she smiled before the door clanged shut.

They waited.

No one brought food, poisoned or otherwise, but Dasha filled their cupped hands with water she pulled from the moisture in the air. Rin drank greedily. The water was clear and tasteless, as if it had come from fresh rainwater. Apparently the floor of the dungeon had been sticky with damp at first, but Dasha had dried it all. So they huddled on the straw while Rin recounted her time with Razo and Tusken. Enna got more and more angry, but Dasha seemed to crumple. Even in the scatty light from the torch, the heartbreak on Dasha's face was as visible as noon sun.

She really did love him, Rin thought. *She loved him in her way as much as I do.* That knowledge made Razo's death feel a hundred times more real, and Rin had to look away.

"Say something hopeful," Dasha said. "I can't stand all this . . . just give me one light thought."

"I think it's my birthday," said Rin.

Enna croaked a half-laugh. "That is really sad, Rin."

"Happy birthday," Dasha whispered.

If Rin were home, one of the brothers might smoke a beehive and bring home a dripping comb. Honey on bread was enough for a celebration, but some years Ma made cakes, and of course the children would decorate her with flowers and sing the song of years. Then Ma would put Ulan or Sari in charge and take Rin for a walk to their favorite copse of aspen, where they'd sit and chat for hours. Honey and flowers and songs were nice—but that walk in the woods with Ma, that was her birthday.

Rin folded herself over her legs, too dried out to do anything but ache.

Enna paced and occasionally struck the door, cursing Selia and her various body parts, and then Razo's stupidity for letting himself be killed. Once she was standing by the door and said, "I think they're nearby. I'm not so good at hearing the wind as Isi, but I think that's her. There's another room down here, and a draft came from under its door."

After that, Enna would not leave the door, straining for any breeze, any hint of where Isi was and what was happening.

A long time later, a door nearby slammed open and they heard Selia's voice shrill and angry.

"What did you do? What did—no! Curse you, idiots!" And she screamed an angry, piercing scream like a pig at slaughter. When they heard her voice again, she was closer, as if in the narrow corridor just outside their door. "Fine. Fine, fine, fine. Too late now. Get rid of it. Throw it at her friends,

tell them that Tusken is next if they lift a finger against me. Do you hear? Tusken is next!”

The three girls were on their feet, watching the door.

“They can’t have meant . . . ,” Dasha began. “She was not talking about . . .”

The door to their dungeon opened just enough for them to see the hands of two soldiers holding a body, yellow hair fallen over the face. They dumped her on the ground.

She did not twitch. She did not groan. The guards slammed the door and fled, but Rin, like Dasha and Enna, had eyes only for Isi. Dasha and Enna knelt at Isi’s side, but the terror in Rin kept her still. She already knew, could already see that something had departed out of Isi. She was looking at a hollowed log. The girl on the floor was dead.

Chapter 22

Dasha's fingers were on Isi's neck, then hovering above her lips. She spoke in hurried gasps. "She's . . . she's not breathing. I don't see a wound, but her hands are ice cold, and she's not—"

Enna shoved Dasha out of the way and crouched beside Isi's body.

"Isi, get up," she said, almost conversationally, then her voice deepened into a demand. "That . . . that *thing* can't kill you. You're Isi, you're my yellow lady, you can't just stop. So get up!"

Enna shook Isi, and the queen's lifeless head rolled on her neck, her hair falling over her face. Rin backed away until she hit the wall. How did these things happen? How did living become dagger-sharp and dangerous, and everything so murky and cold, no way home, no light, just wandering and wandering and being locked away and killing and dying and pain? The weight of the whole world hung above her head, threatening to crush her, promising to make the end of everything. She wanted to be far away. She could not run, she would not let herself scream, and in desperation she sought out the one thing she could to survive the moment—she tried to remember the calm of a tree.

She was standing straight, her feet grounded on the earth, her head reaching for light. She let her chest fill with the memory of a tree's thoughts, the thrumming of sap, the contentment of soil and light. Peace rushed up from her toes, strengthening her legs, making her skin feel as hard as bark. When she opened her eyes again, the whole world seemed changed. Still, timeless, a breath held, as if she were both awake in the human world and asleep inside the green world. Dasha was bent over Isi. Enna was sobbing, laying her head on Isi's neck. But Rin the girl, Rin the tree in her serenity, understood that everything was going to be fine.

She looked over Isi's body, but she saw it like a tree—it was not chopped down or burned to ash, not broken into bits. It was simply uprooted. The leaves were beginning to wilt, the roots drying in the air, but it had not been long—perhaps only moments before. Dasha had said Isi's hands were ice cold. In Rin's pocket of stillness, her thoughts cleared of emotion, she realized that was strange. If Isi had stopped breathing moments before, her body should still be warm. This was not a normal death, then. Something

might be done. It was out of her power, but . . . She looked at Enna and seemed to see a mass of white and orange swirling around her—wind and fire, breath and heat, dancing together, ready for action. So Rin reached out her hand, gripped Enna's shoulder, and tried to be to Enna what a tree was to Rin. A source of peace, a place of clear thought. Just an idea of it, that was where to begin.

Rin found the words to speak. "She's only just stopped breathing, she's cold and airless, only just."

Enna breathed in, a great slow gasp as loud as wind rushing through a cave. Her sobbing stopped. She looked back at Rin and blinked. Where despair had clouded Enna's eyes, an idea glimmered.

Enna placed her opened hands on Isi's chest and belly. Her eyes closed. Rin closed her eyes, too. She was still touching Enna, and the deep, tough thread of her core understood what Enna was doing—setting tiny flares of heat inside Isi, in her heart, in her blood and muscles, filling her everywhere with gentle taps, warming her body, the work as intricate as threading a tapestry. And she pushed air into Isi's nose, into her lungs, in and out too, the rhythm as natural as breathing, the movement swirling the hair over her face.

While Enna's wind tried to force her to breathe, subtle strokes of heat worked at Isi's heart, making her chest rise and fall in spasms—*ta-tum, ta-tum, ta-tum* . . .

The peace in Rin was starting to fade, the surety that everything would be all right trickling down her length, dripping from her fingertips. Rin opened her eyes. Isi was still, her eyes open but unlooking. And terror began to scratch at Rin, to shake her limbs. Tusken's mother was dead. Tusken would have no Ma. Rin's grip on Enna's shoulder weakened.

But Enna did not stop. "You do not get to die, Isi. *She* doesn't get to kill you, Anidori-Kiladra. You are too strong to die. Listen to me!"

Keeping one hand on Isi's chest, Enna grabbed Dasha and pulled her close. "Do what I'm doing. She needs water too, and more fire. Easy with the heat, just enough to wake her up."

"I . . . I . . . ," Dasha stuttered.

"Do it!" yelled Enna.

Rin did not wait to be commanded too. She sat by Isi's head, held her face in her hands, smoothed her hair as if her hands were wind going through leaves. She tried to find that peace again, to feel it rise out of the

earth and into her core, to let it flow into Isi. She did not know if it would help, but the terror was so thick if she did not try something, she would harrow her way out of the dungeon herself. There was this body—this still, cold body before her, this husk that used to be Isi, and she could not bear it. So she reminded herself of who Isi really was, the truth of Isi. The words formed in her throat, and she decided to speak them aloud. If people-speaking could add any good or truth to the world, then she demanded of herself that it do so now, convince Isi of who she was, help bring her back before she slipped completely into that unknown of beyond.

"Mother of Tusken," Rin whispered, "wife of Geric, queen of Bayern, daughter of Kildenree, friend of Enna, friend of Dasha and Finn and Razo. And Rin."

And Enna was saying, "Take a breath. Take a breath, Isi. You don't get to die. I can feel you in there still. Just wake up!"

A breath. A gasp. Rin pulled back, as surprised as if she'd suddenly found herself holding a snake.

The hair over Isi's face stirred. Her heart was beating so loudly, Rin could hear its murmur. Isi's chest rose. The three girls bent over her, their hands on her arms, on her cheeks, their breath held as if not to make any sound louder than Isi's heart.

Dasha swept the hair off of Isi's face. The queen's eyelids closed and opened. And closed.

"Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee," Enna said, her face drenched from crying. "If you're really alive, you'd better say so right now or I'll kill you myself."

Isi's eyelids barely parted. She opened her mouth, then coughed dryly. Dasha's fingers flinched, and Rin guessed the Tiran girl was moving water in the air to wet the queen's throat and mouth.

Isi's voice croaked. "Just now, stuffing the queen of Kel into a barrel of nails sounds like a mercy."

The three girls laughed, then sobbed, hugging one another, repeating Isi's words again and again, wiping their running noses on their hems. Isi just smiled and curled up.

They were all exhausted from laughing and weeping and almost dying, and they lay down, bundled around one another. Rin slept with her head on Dasha's side, one hand on Isi's hair. Enna slept closest to Isi, her arms wrapped fiercely around her friend to keep her warm.

Chapter 23

Rin woke with hope clawing up from the pit of misery in her chest. If they could get to Razo's body, maybe they could fix him as they had done for Isi. Dasha could give him water, and Enna could give him heat and breath so he lived again. *If only . . . if only . . .* She closed her eyes and imagined Razo breathing in, sitting up, and asking, "What happened? Did I fall asleep? Where's Tusken, and why are all you crazy girls staring at me like that?"

She clung to the hope because she sensed it was about to blow away. Isi'd had no serious injury and she'd stopped breathing only moments before. Fire and wind could not heal a burn or a sword wound, could not bring back a boy dead for a day. *My brother is dead.* The thought pressed on Rin, pushed against her eyes, filled her mouth. She thrust away that knowledge, desperate to keep it from burying her, at least not until Tusken was safe.

Isi stirred and seemed to want to wake, but Enna kept shushing her and insisting she sleep on, until at last Isi protested that she was thirsty enough to drink Enna's blood.

Then Enna popped right up and said brightly, "Good morning, Your Majesty. I believe the rooster has crowed."

Dasha said there was not much water left in the dungeon air. She pulled as much as she could, letting fat drops splash into their cupped hands. Rin sipped the warm liquid from her hands, licking her fingers, feeling the air around her crackle and dry up. Their bellies all groaned in chorus, and to distract them from hunger, Isi told them about the day before. She and Selia had talked for hours. Selia had tried to persuade Isi to sign the document, but Isi had insisted she would not sign anything without seeing Tusken first.

"I was a little better at resisting her people-speaking than last time, especially when she was trying to provoke me to do what I didn't want to do. Her ability to dissuade me from action was still quite strong. After a time she got frustrated and wanted her pet fire-speakers to hurt me without really hurting me, just to cause me pain. They were poking me with heat. It stung. I didn't attack back, but I did wash away their heat with wind. Nuala, her favorite of them, retaliated and pulled all the heat out of my body. I think it was a mistake. I think she was just clumsy and took too much. But

that's what did it . . ." Isi put a hand on her chest and stared at it for some time.

"Do you want to tell us?" Dasha asked, her voice more concerned than curious. "What was it like?"

"It hurt." Isi took a breath. "It hurt a lot, as if she'd put her fingernails into me and was yanking out something essential, like, oh, all my internal organs."

"Lovely," said Enna.

Isi's eyes were haunted. "The yanking kept going, and I couldn't . . . while Selia was talking at me, I couldn't concentrate enough to call a wind. Then a huge pulsing numbness exploded from my belly and radiated through my whole body, and . . . I don't remember much of anything until I heard Rin's voice, and then Enna shouting at me. You were none too gentle."

"What am I supposed to do when my best friend dies on me? Pat your cheek and say good for you?"

Isi squinted at the dark wall as if she were trying to make out someone's face from a distance.

"You remember something else," Rin whispered.

"Do I?" Isi smiled, surprised. "I wasn't sure. It's like I have a memory of a memory, barely the scent of it. I think . . . there is a place that still remembers. Where all things know all the languages. I think I was there, or almost there. I felt something . . ." She frowned in concentration. "I think I was bursting with the first words of *all* the languages. A good feeling. For a moment, I was looking forward to learning them all."

Isi's gaze shot to the door. "Someone's coming."

"Quick, pretend to be dead," said Enna.

Isi lay on her side, her back to the door. Dasha and Enna knelt beside her.

"What's your plan?" Isi whispered.

"Surprise," Enna said. "I guess."

Rin did not think. She bound to her feet and pressed herself against the wall, closest to the door's opening. She'd stopped moving just as a boy of about fourteen years, his chin and cheeks red and pocked, peeked through the bars in the door.

Enna and Rin met eyes, then Enna leaned down and whispered something in Isi's ear.

“I am just a page,” he said, his Kelish accent less pronounced than most Rin had heard. “So do not hurt me, please. Her Majesty wants—*aah!*”

He cried out as Isi twitched. Enna and Dasha pretended shock.

“Can it be?” Enna exclaimed. “Is it possible? Does she . . . *live*?”

Isi twitched again.

“*Aah!*” said the page.

Dasha stooped over Isi’s body. “There’s something strange. I can’t feel a pulse, and yet she moves! Come look! Hurry, you’ll want to report this to your queen.”

The page opened the door, barely peeking through. Three soldiers were gawking over his shoulder. Isi trembled again, and they recoiled, but when she stilled, they opened the door a little more, peeking closer, their attention wholly on Isi.

It was not much space, but it was enough for a thin girl with a lot of sneaking practice. Her whole mind, her whole body, pulled in thoughts of that tree by the wall—no trunk, a few scrawny branches thrusting leaves up to the sun, its roots still living, still drinking and growing, still breaking stone.

Go like roots under soil, she told herself. *Moving, though no one sees; living, though no one notices.*

She bent her knees and eased through the opening, ducking beneath the page’s arm, twisting to avoid the guard. She did not look back as she left the dungeon behind.

Rin fought to keep her legs from shaking and her steps careless. Trees were never afraid. Finding Tusken was as important as roots finding water, as leaves cupping sunshine. She flowed through the underground corridor, up the twisting stair. Some thoughts she tried to keep small and quiet in her head—the knowledge that if she was discovered again, Selia would cut her throat and toss her over the wall. It did not matter anymore, not since she saw Isi die, not since Razo died. If life and death were so sudden, so arbitrary, then nothing mattered. Except Tusken.

Climbing from the lower stairs into the central chamber was the worst part. Only a handful of soldiers, Nuala, and Selia had seen Rin. Dressed in Kelish robes, walking with purpose, she hoped others would dismiss her. But climbing up from the dungeon would certainly make her look suspicious.

She hesitated near the top, listening. There were footfalls, conversation, but perhaps not near. She took a deep breath, reminded her body what it felt like to be calm, to feel breezy, to walk with casual purpose.

She climbed the last stair. The guards at the gate were looking out, not in. Workers were coming and going from the kitchen, but did not glance her way. She circled the first floor of the central tower, picking up a discarded bucket to aid her look of errand runner. The spotty-faced page came up from the dungeons and continued upstairs. She turned her back and pretended busyness sorting plates on a table, hiding in plain sight until she could no longer hear the slap of his boots.

She passed by the four chambers of the side towers, their doors all open in the summer heat—kitchen, kitchen storage, armory, and a rest chamber for the guards. None seemed likely places to keep a kidnapped prince.

Rin started toward the central winding stairs up to the second floor.

". . . have much to account for, Nuala. Let me see for myself if the little sausage lives."

Selia's voice. Rin stopped, pressing her back against the rounded wall separating her from the stairs. Cold sluiced through her limbs, and she held her breath, listening to Selia and her hearth-watchers descending into the dungeon. Rin closed her eyes, trying to remember the rhythmic whooshing of life inside a tree.

The lick of sunlight on a leaf, she told herself. *Deep water flowing.*

With trembling stilled and breathing slowed, Rin left her wall and climbed the stairs. She'd already begun to ascend when two more soldiers came down after Selia's party. Rin's face burned red in surprise, betraying herself in her panic. It was too late to hide the blush, to pretend innocence and normalcy.

They stopped her, demanding something in Kelish. She tried to moisten her mouth, but people-speaking was useless when she could not speak their language.

Then again . . . She could not risk saying a word, but if guessing a person's thoughts and desires was part of people-speaking, she was not completely powerless.

The soldier who had spoken was handsome—very handsome, with bright blue eyes and a square jaw, firm shoulders and chest. By comparison, his perfectly normal companion seemed dull.

Rin ducked her head, putting a shy hand over her mouth, pretending her blush was caused by embarrassed affection. Recalling the mannerisms of her oldest niece Minna whenever she met new boys, Rin glanced up at the handsome soldier through her lashes, back down again, and up, as if she would never tire of the sight of him. She licked her lips, smiling the sweetest, most innocent smile. And then, she giggled, covering her eyes, hiding playfully behind her hands.

The second soldier groaned impatiently. Clearly the handsome one got this reaction a lot from girls. The first spoke again, his tone exasperated, but there was no real fire behind it. He was flattered, she could tell, and now there was a danger he might corner her into a conversation. So she giggled again, peeking at him through her fingers, and fled up the stairs.

She stopped at the top just out of sight, her hand on her chest to keep her heart from thudding through, listening to hear if they would follow. One soldier called up after her, but the second said something in a teasing tone to his companion, and they continued down. Rin exhaled and took in her surroundings.

The central chamber on the second floor was fitted with large tables, carved wooden chairs, tapestries twitching in the breeze that arched in through the tall, thin windows. Compared to the bustle of downstairs, it was as quiet as a meadow morning. It took some time for Rin to make her way through all four side chambers. One of the doors was locked. She could hear voices on the other side, and she waited for someone inside to emerge. Her legs hurt, as if she'd been standing for days. Selia was down in the dungeon even now. She would notice Rin's absence. Soon they would search, and no girlish giggles would protect her.

Some minutes passed when two disheveled-looking women emerged from the fourth door and blinked at the day as if just waking up. They hurried downstairs, letting the door swing closed behind them. Rin stood behind it, grabbing the door before it shut and slipping inside. Another sleeping chamber, this one crammed with beds and pallets, and completely empty of life.

The winding stair to the third story of the central tower seemed to stretch into the clouds, and she imagined it the trunk of a tree, leading her out to its branches. The idea made the castle seem less hostile.

At last it opened into a large receiving room, not as grandly furnished as Isi's in Bayern, but neat with rugs and tables and lounges. It was empty.

Two of the side doors stood open and Rin moved through those chambers, finding no one. She tried the door of the third—locked. The fourth was closed but unlocked. It was a bedchamber, this one with only one large bed. The narrow light from the window dropped a slit of yellow across the floor, neat as the slice of a blade. The contrast of concentrated brightness against the dim room was blinding. Rin squinted through the glare and spotted a bump on the bed, a shape like a sleeping child.

She leaped forward, her hands out to pull him in to her chest, to cuddle him and kiss him.

"Tusken!"

The shape that gave beneath her touch, soft and square, was a pillow under a blanket. The room was empty.

Rin slammed a fist against the wall and sank to her knees. She was exhausted, starving, her whole self teetering on the edge of despair. Perhaps Tusken was not in the castle itself but in an outbuilding—the garrison perhaps. Or even in the town of Daire to the northeast of the fortress. Wherever he was, there would be hearth-watchers guarding him, and soldiers too. How could Rin possibly get him free? Or even run back to tell Isi without getting charred to bits?

It did not matter, she decided. They had killed Razo. They had killed Isi and would again, and that was wrong. Being with Isi had not changed her the way she'd hoped, but she knew Isi would not quit searching. Rin would check that last locked door, then the garrison, and walk to town if she had to. Keep moving. Throw herself into the fray and hope for the best.

Rin inhaled deeply, letting breath fill her center, and eased her way out the door.

She made sure the door shut silently behind her, then turned. Selia was entering the chamber, surrounded by seven hearth-watchers and several soldiers. Behind Selia, with her head bowed, came Isi.

Chapter 24

N*o.* Rin had been so sure Enna and Dasha would not allow Isi to be taken alone again. But Selia must have proved the stronger. Rin ducked behind the nearest chair, but it was too late. She'd been seen.

Nuala yelled in Kelish, and fire erupted on the rug beneath Rin's feet, encircling her in a flaming ring. She screamed, tossing her arms across her face to shield her eyes from the blaze. The fire extinguished just as suddenly as it started and soldiers were around her, hands seizing her arms, shoulders, waist, and hair. She whimpered in pain.

"I won't allow it," Isi was shouting. "If you hurt her, or hurt me again, I will fight back. And you don't want to fight me, Selia. I'm not the same girl you left in the Forest those years ago."

"Easy," said Selia. "No one need fight. Let us talk as friends. I did say no harm would come to anyone as long as you cooperated. When this girl sneaked out of her safe cell and violated my home, she forfeited her right to my protection."

"Selia—," Isi started.

Selia lifted one of her pale, thin-fingered hands. "But to show you my compassion, I will pardon her. For the moment. You see she still lives, the fire that could have been her death doused and gone. Her safety as well as Tusken's depends on you, Crown Princess. But just to be safe, since she's proved to be a slippery little thing . . ." Selia motioned to one of the soldiers, a thick-set man with auburn hair and white temples. He clamped iron cuffs around Rin's wrists, one hand gripping her upper arm.

Rin winced as the cuffs bit into her skin and wondered why they did not just kill her. But she remembered Isi telling Enna, *Selia might threaten you, hurt you . . . use you to get to me.* Rin's stomach squelched as if full of sour milk.

"Your Majesty?" It was hard to use that title on Selia, but she managed to squeak it out. She was cuffed and held, but not gagged, and she reasoned she had nothing much to lose. "May I speak with you?"

Something in Rin's aspect might have intrigued Selia, or alarmed her, because she strolled a little nearer, keeping the soldier who held Rin between them.

“You have something worth telling me?” Selia raised an eyebrow.

Rin cleared her throat, then spoke softly, sure Selia would not allow her to keep talking if her hearth-watchers overheard.

“When you’re muddled and lost in a crowd of people, you can’t see yourself anymore. All you can see is them. So many faces and voices, so hard to remember which one is you, because it’s easier to see all of them than to see yourself. It can feel like drowning.”

Rin was breathing so hard, she was getting light-headed. Though Selia cut her eyes at Rin, she did not interrupt. Rin continued.

“You need to be up a little higher, just to keep ahold of yourself. You *should* be a queen. That is what you were meant for, right? A queen—one woman who is lifted above, who has the right to speak and everyone must obey. Who is not lost in the crowd. No one would question the way you hold yourself up, the way you speak out, if only you were a queen. It’s not fair that a queen is decided by birth, is it? A queen should be chosen, a queen should be the one everyone loves and wants to follow. That’s you.”

Still Selia listened, though her gaze was not something Rin enjoyed enduring. Rin’s breathing was becoming more sure.

“I understand that, Selia, and I think you know I can sympathize more than anyone. But I also understand the rest.” Here her voice dipped even softer. “The hate that chokes your soul, the shame of cheating to get what you want, of tricking people into loving you, of pushing yourself up so high you can no longer touch and hold the people who loved you. Everything you’ve accomplished doesn’t feel as good as it should, does it? You hurt so much. And you think that hurting Isi in turn will make that go away at last. It won’t. When Isi is dead, when Tusken and Geric are dead, when you’re crowned queen of Bayern, the pain will still chase you. Let Isi go. Let Tusken go. Be queen of Kel. This is your best chance at being happy.”

It was alarming to witness the struggle of emotions on Selia’s face—anger, curiosity, fear, wonder, and beneath it all, horrifying pain. Her face was blotchy red, her chin quivered, her eyes blinked too fast. Unexpected tears stung in Rin’s eyes as this woman who had killed her brother became so terrifyingly human. Rin’s heart ached for the pale-haired girl from Kildenree: homeless, wandering, unhappy, and searching all her life for relief. *She could help me,* Rin thought, *and I could help her. I could.*

Then Selia straightened, her nostrils flaring. She breathed in and her struggle ended. She came very close to Rin, leaning so her lips touched

Rin's ear as she whispered, "You understand nothing. You are a worm quivering on a stone. You are a crushed beetle. And if you'd had any real talent at understanding, you would have seen that I don't care to be understood."

Selia put a hand on the soldier's upper arm and whispered, "Hurt her."

His elbow slammed into Rin's gut, and she doubled over, groaning.

Isi started. "No!"

"Whoops!" Selia said. "I said, *don't* hurt the girl. So sorry, Crown Princess, an error. We should get on with these negotiations to avoid any more mishaps."

Rin's gut wrenched, her wrists smarted where metal rubbed against her skin, her head ached from her rough capture. Speaking had not helped. Selia would force Isi to sign the document and then she would kill her. Rin sensed that familiar pit of despair open beneath her, felt herself barely balanced and slipping. *Useless, hopeless, failed again, Razo's dead and nothing matters . . .*

The windows were open, and the breeze that trickled inside carried the first cool murmurings of autumn. Autumn was Razo's favorite season, mostly because he liked nuts, and nothing pleased him more than scavenging for his own food—except perhaps eating it. Despite her nauseating pain, Rin wanted to smile. Ma said that giving in to despair was like eating poisonous berries to keep from feeling hungry. Razo never despaired.

You're Forest born, he'd told her.

Rin kept her eyes on Isi, set her jaw, and breathed deeply.

Selia was sitting on a carved chair with deep red cushions, several paces from Isi. The seven hearth-watchers surrounded Isi, and two soldiers with swords drawn and bows on their shoulders stood behind Selia's chair. Selia was smiling at Isi, speaking in her usual calm, pleasant tone.

"Spark a single flame, and Tusken loses a finger. Hurt one of my people, and Tusken loses a limb. I'd prefer to keep him alive for my purposes, but truth be told, I don't need *all* of him. That leads to a question—how much fun can a child have without legs or fingers? I can't imagine you would be so cruel, Crown Princess, but I really don't know."

"I won't hurt you." Isi's face troubled, her voice heightened as if she were trying to speak from the bottom of a well. "But understand, if you kill me or hurt Tusken, an army of your hearth-watchers and soldiers won't stop

that girl in the dungeon. If you had truly killed me, Enna would have seen to you and all your followers. The moment she so much as suspects I'm hurt, she and Dasha will tear this castle—"

Selia tsked. "Really, such talk."

"I will protect myself. If you—"

"Please, show some pride. There is no need to grovel for mercy. Yesterday was a mistake"—she glanced at Nuala, whose broad face was bright red with chagrin—"and will not happen again, so long as you behave. I regret the tactics taken to encourage your participation, and I regret your placement in those foul dungeons. An oversight on the part of my steward. You are my guest, an honored prisoner of war, and from now on you will be treated as such. Your son will go home and your friends as well, if only you will sign your name here."

Selia gestured to the ornate table before her, the only barrier between the two yellow-haired women. A document lay beside a quill and pot of ink. Rin observed Selia, trying to tell if the woman was lying. She seemed to mean what she said—she was willing to send Tusken home if Isi signed. But there were mysteries behind those words that Rin could not guess.

"Sign, Crown Princess. Sign your name. So simple a thing! You acknowledge that I have won this move in our war game, and thus allow the boy to return to his father. I swear on my own life that I will not kill him, and he will not come to any harm, save if you break my rules." She picked up the paper, wafting it in the air, her eyes shut as if it created a most refreshing breeze. "Just sign your name, my dear. Just sign."

"Fine." Isi spoke rigidly, as if she had practiced her words in advance. "I will put my signature to that document, decreeing you lady of the eastern provinces on Tusken's eighteenth birthday, so long as he is alive and well on that day and living with his parents in Bayern."

Selia barely flinched, but Rin's eyes caught it. "A marvelous idea! Well thought. Sign first, and I swear upon the life of my mother that I will add that clause as an addendum."

"I . . ." Isi shook her head, a tight, small gesture. "Write the addendum first. And I will sign it, after I see my son."

Selia clicked her tongue in disappointment. "Crown Princess, Crown Princess, now why would I hazard my most valuable possession? As much as I trust my voice soothes your more suicidal instincts, I just don't know

what you might do if Tusken were in this room. I need to keep him away from you so I can return him safely to his father."

Isi glanced once at Rin before speaking again, her face taxed as though she spoke with effort. "That was clever. What you did. Escaping execution in Bayern."

"Yes, it was, wasn't it?" Selia smiled at the window as if at a pleasant memory.

"How did you do it?"

Selia looked at Isi with sympathy, and Rin knew she guessed that Isi was trying to get her to reveal some weakness. "It is a marvelous story. I will tell you all about it after you sign."

Isi pressed her lips together, breathing in through her nose. "I guess you made an offer to your prison guard, though I can't think of many things you had to offer . . ."

Selia sat up straighter, her eyes twinkling. "Oh, is that what you imagine? You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"I know you're capable of escaping death by my hands, but I've done the same from yours," Isi said, her face still down. "I know you're capable of marrying the king of Kel, just as I married the king of Bayern. So far I haven't seen you do much that I haven't done as well."

Selia stood, her lips trembling. She must have known that Isi was baiting her, must have read those intentions in her old rival as easily as she talked her into submission. But she could not seem to help speaking.

"I am capable of everything, Anidori. Everything! It was all me. You should feel flattered by the lengths I go to get your attention. Even the war was my gift to you."

Isi scoffed, but Rin knew it was just to provoke Selia more. "You started the war?"

Selia's smile was condescending, making sure Isi knew she realized her intentions, though she was willing to speak all the same. "After your botched execution, I left Bayern and went south to Tira. I adore Ingridan and genuinely considered marrying the prince there, but he has no true power. Shame. Tira was a lovely place and so enchanted by war, much to my delight. After some prodding on my part, the Assembly was swooning in rapture at the idea of invading Bayern."

Isi gaped, genuinely shocked, and no reaction could have pleased Selia more. She laughed, clasping her hands to her chest.

“Yes, that was me! It was a wonderful plan, until . . . Enna, was it? Yes, Enna started burning. As you can imagine, I was intrigued by the idea of a person setting fires out of nothing. I spent some time in Yasid and uncovered writings on how to learn the way with fire, bringing them back to Tira. There was a disillusioned Tiran war captain by the name of Ledel who was embarrassingly fond of me. He was thrilled to try and learn the fire way, to teach a band of soldiers too, and simply gushed over my idea of using it to restart the Tiran and Bayern war. I left him to it and journeyed on to Kel, just in case he failed, which he did, poor dear. But no matter, by then I was courting the king of Kel. I have decided war is much too unpredictable. This way is superior, because here we are.”

Isi did not try to hide her shock and anger. That was wise, Rin thought. Selia would see through it anyway.

“You didn’t explain how you freed yourself from the barrel of nails,” Isi said. “I imagine it’s too shameful to repeat.”

Again, fury flashed in Selia’s face, and Rin winced, expecting at the very least thrown chairs and tables. Selia’s eyes were hot, but she remained in control, speaking in fixed, measured phrases.

“It was so ordinary as hardly worth the trouble to mention. I made friends with my guard. I invited him to free me and put some animal in my place. I suggested he be the one to bury the dead animal so no other knew. So devoted he was to me, he did not speak of it all these years, but of course I could not trust him to remain silent forever. And if anyone suspected I was still alive, getting my hands on you and Tusken would prove so much more difficult. Even that loose end is tied up now, thanks to you. I had my hearth-watchers burn that little town in order to lure you out. Geric came instead, but as I’d hoped, my one-time collaborator rode along.”

“Brynn. You had your fire-speakers kill him.”

Selia examined her fingernails. “Was that his name? Of course I had to wound Geric as well so you would come trotting to his rescue. With both you and Geric out of the palace, your darling son would be much easier to carry away. So I thought. But not as easy as if you actually brought him along for the plucking! Many thanks for that, Crown Princess.”

Isi squeezed her eyes shut.

Selia eased into her cushioned chair with a forced calm, the remnants of anger disappearing. “Well. You see how utterly useless it is to fight against me. I have friends in five kingdoms, I have knowledge and understanding

you can only guess. And I will win. Submit to me." She spoke the words like a mother to a baby, encouraging her to rest. "I know you are exhausted; it will be such a relief. Submit to me, and then you will rest and all will be well."

Isi inhaled deeply, lowered her head, and knelt. With deliberate show, she bowed her body to the floor, her forehead pressed to the rug, her arms stretched out.

It caused Rin an almost physical pain to watch Selia's satisfaction then, her glory in victory. Rin knew how Selia felt—strong, unique, special, sure that others could not comprehend it, but at the same time, frantic that they know. Rin was sickened now to remember her own rush of elation when she realized how much she could affect Wilem's actions. She had glowed with the heady sensation that she understood everyone—she could do what ever she desired. How that desire had burned!

Rin was still doubled over from the slam to her gut. Perhaps she'd been wrong to stifle her desire to speak all those years. If she had not fought it, she would be stronger now. She might stop Selia, instead of cowering shackled in a corner, Razo dead, Isi prostrate.

Seeing Isi beside Selia set them into sharp relief. Selia spoke like a queen, ruled and commanded and moved like a queen. But Isi *was* a queen —even captured, even prone on the floor. It stung a little, to see in Isi what Rin wanted but could not be. But it was liberating too, just to recognize real power. Knowing Isi, Rin did not believe she could ever be tricked into buying Selia's crooked kind of queenship.

I don't want to be Selia, Rin thought. *Maybe I'm weaker for that, but so be it. I don't want to be her.*

Selia gazed at Isi for some time, then sighed as if regretful to end the moment. "That's incredibly sweet, Crown Princess, but the submission I requested included your signature on the paper. No more questions. No more stalling. I will see you sign."

Isi returned to her knees, her eyes glancing at the paper on the table. Her lips were white and trembling, but still she said, "And I will see my son."

Selia spoke as if to a naughty but adorable child. "Here, I will compromise. That is what a good queen does. I will show you some token of his well-being, all right? Nuala, go request something of the boy's from Cilie."

Nuala hurried to the winding stairs, her head bowed. Since her careless and failed killing of Isi, she had lost her self-assured bearing. It made Rin wonder what Selia had done to the woman. Or surely Selia need only speak a few words to tear the confidence from her previously proud follower.

The sounds of Nuala's footfalls climbed down. So Tusken was not behind the locked door. In the garrison then? Rin wondered if Isi would strike now that they had a better idea of her son's location. But Selia kept talking, her voice sliding over Rin, slithering into her ears, filling her head. Isi's eyes were closed as if struggling against the noise. She plugged her ears for a moment, but Selia's voice was high and became even louder, and she soon gave up.

Rin did not bother trying. Her middle still ached as if she'd swallowed herself, and she stared at the thick clamps around her wrists. While she looked, the single metal link joining the two shackles glowed red, then faded. Rin blinked. Again it glowed red, then orange before fading. Isi was working on her chain, sending heat into that ring to weaken it. Trying to help her escape. The thought made Rin sad. For once she did not want to run away—she wished to stay and help.

The ring glowed yellow, then white, the heat burning through the cuffs to Rin's wrists, and Rin pulled her hands away from each other, the cuffs biting into her skin, the link thinning, lengthening just a little. One of the hearth-watchers muttered something to another, both alert now and looking at Rin. The heat vanished, and Isi ducked her head. The hearth-watchers looked at Selia and whispered to each other, as if trying to decide whether to interrupt Selia. But no fire had erupted to cause alarm, and Isi sent no more heat, though they watched her now with hawk eyes.

Nuala returned with Cilie. Isi's former waiting woman hurried to Selia's side, taking in the sight of her mistress with wide, hungry eyes. She handed something to Selia, and when Selia touched her hand to take it, Cilie's eyes wetted with joy. The display enraged Rin. That pig-eyed woman had betrayed Isi and conspired to kidnap Tusken so she could be Selia's lap dog? Rin should have pummeled her when she had the chance.

Cilie curtsied deeply and began to walk out of the room backward, never looking away from Selia.

"Wait, Cilie."

Cilie froze. Selia's tone had not been pleased.

"How is the boy?"

“He’s well, Your Majesty.”

“Are you sure? You aren’t with him at the moment.”

“I left him with many protectors and only just to answer your summons.”

“I ordered you never to leave his side, did I not?”

Cilie’s eyes went wide at Selia’s icy tone. She stared, unblinking, unmoving.

“Did I not very specifically tell you to never leave his side? Why, here is his worried mother. What must she think of me, seeing that the caregiver I assigned to Tusken would leave him so readily?”

Cilie’s mouth opened and closed, until she finally stammered out, “I was only . . . you called me—”

“I asked for tokens, not for you. You could have stayed. I need to show his mother how seriously I take this, Cilie, so she can rest assured her son is in safe hands. You failed me. I hope it is only a part of you that is unreliable and not your whole being. You are made up of pieces, Cilie. You would be better off without them all. Give me one.”

Selia opened a drawer in the table, pulled out a pair of long, thin scissors, and handed them to Cilie. The girl’s eyes were wide, her lips trembling, and she stared at the scissors as if at her own death.

“My lady, Your Majesty, I don’t—”

“Do you question me?”

Cilie broke into sobs and fell to the ground, petting Selia’s skirt. “No, please, I will do what ever you ask, mistress. What ever you want of me.”

“You have such lovely hair. Haven’t I always told you so?”

“Y-yes, yes, you have.”

“Give it to me.”

Cilie’s hand flew to her head. Rin had seen Cilie brush that hair for an hour at a time, her beautiful thick hair that framed a plain face, wide cheeks, and small, close-together eyes. Beautiful hair that all of Isi’s waiting women had envied, that the palace women had admired whenever she’d walked past. Fat tears began to drop from Cilie’s eyes, but she did not blink.

“My hair?” she whispered.

Selia nodded matter-of-factly. “A fitting sacrifice, I think. But I am all benevolence. If you wish, you may choose some other piece.”

The scissors trembled, but Cilie did not hesitate as she lifted her left hand and let the silver blades slide over her smallest finger. Her right hand squeezed, and the scissors bit through bone.

If Cilie screamed, Rin did not hear it. Everything in Rin went out like a smothered candle. Suddenly she was crumpled on the floor. The soldier still had a firm grip on her arm. He hauled her back on her feet, and her brain seemed to roll around in her head like seeds in a dried gourd.

Cilie's face was white and she looked up at the ceiling as Nuala approached her. A flare of heat struck the stump where Cilie's finger had been and the bleeding stopped.

"You may go, Cilie, but take the scissors with you back to Tusken . . . just in case." Selia's gaze rested on Isi as the waiting woman gripped the scissors in her undamaged hand and, trembling, crossed the room to the stairs.

Selia examined the object Cilie had brought from Tusken, her smile adoring, then she held it up—a cut lock of hair in Tusken's unmistakable tawny hue.

Isi's breath shuddered with a tense sob.

Rin bent over, her head feeling airless after her faint. Close by her feet lay a shard of ceramic, perhaps from a broken pot. Rin could imagine Selia throwing things in a rage. It was too small to use as a dagger, but she palmed it anyway.

"So you see, he is quite well and whole." Selia rubbed the lock against her cheek. "Just missing a bit of hair, that is. He is such a good boy. I don't think there will be any need to use those scissors on him. No, I'm sure there won't. As long as his mother behaves."

Rin fingered the shard and daydreamed about throwing it at Selia. With her wrists clamped, she could not get enough of a swing to do any damage. She did not think even Razo would be able to hit a target with his hands cuffed. So what would Razo do? Something ridiculous, she thought, something to get a laugh. Make sport of Selia. Pull a prank.

Selia's droning was making the whole room seem dark and cramped, and Isi looked ready to collapse into a heap. Rin had to do something.

In a low, quick movement, she tossed the shard across the room. It struck the wall under one of the windows with a distinct *clack*. Everyone looked toward the noise.

Selia frowned. "What—"

Rin made a startled scream.

Selia turned her slow, icy gaze to Rin. "You interrupted me."

“I’m sorry, I just can’t believe what I saw. A huge stone cairn walked by, and one of its littlest stones fell through the window.”

Some of the Kels looked at the window nervously. A hearth-watcher made a sign over his chest as if to ward away bad luck.

Selia snarled. “What are you talking about?”

Speaking was making Rin giddy. “Maybe the gods sneaked out of the wood, and the cairns are looking for them. Selia, have you seen any gods running about your castle? We could go look in the kitchen—they might be hungry. Or maybe they’re out playing stones with your mercenary army. The cairn is probably on its way to join them—I bet cairns are naturals at playing stones.”

“You have lots of pieces too, girl, and it’s time you earned your right to be here. I think I’ll start taking pieces of you until your timid royal friend signs.”

The soldier yanked Rin’s arm up and held a knife under her finger.

“No, don’t!” Isi yelled.

Rin’s whole body clenched, and she found herself standing on her toes, trying to get away from that sharpness. The soldier looked at Selia for permission.

“Yes, I think I will,” said Selia. “I’m going to carve her up piece by piece for you to watch, so you can imagine what will happen to Tusken. I wonder what he’ll think of his nurse-mary then. She’ll have trouble carrying him home with her fingerless paws. Cilie is surely back with Tusken now—I wonder if he’s noticed her missing finger. I wonder if he knows he could lose his own so easily.”

Distantly, Rin knew she should be terrified, but her mind was reeling with a realization. She had been looking at Selia as she spoke—really looking to understand. The laugh, the prank, had made Rin feel more like herself, like Forest born, like Agget-kin. Made her forget to be afraid, forget that she’d let Razo die and would soon be killed too. She’d been so certain she would fail, she had not questioned the failure. But now she watched Selia speak and saw what she had not looked for before.

Selia is lying. Realization flowed through Rin, so hot and sure that she barely noticed the sharpness of the knife against her finger. Selia’s guards had not caught Tusken, had not killed Razo. They must be out there in the wood, safe, hidden. Alive. Far from this viper’s hissing voice, far from soldiers and hearth-watchers and cages and dungeons. Of course she was

lying. Rin could see it now etched in every line of her face, in the darkness under her eyes that belied her forced calm, in the twitching corner of her mouth.

Razo must be alive! And Tusken . . .

Enough, Rin thought. *That's just plain enough.*

Isi was standing at the table. She picked up the pen.

The soldier's knife bit a little harder against Rin's finger, teasing the skin almost to bleeding. There seemed to be no energy left in her that had not been doused by grief and exhaustion and doubt. But she found some, hidden pockets of will she did not know she had. She did not hesitate as she gathered all that energy together, pushed it into words, and sent them at Isi, quick and strong as a crossbow bolt.

"She lies," Rin said. "Razo lives. Tusken is safe."

In one moment, Isi's aspect completely changed—her eyes widened, her back straightened. The pen dropped from her hand.

All she said was, "Rin, get down."

Chapter 25

The knife under Rin's finger became red hot, burning her skin before the soldier flung it away. Rin dropped to the floor, though her guard still kept hold of her arm. The other soldiers and the hearth-watchers leaped toward Isi, but a windstorm had begun. Then the room exploded.

First fire burst through the roof, so hot and quick the timber burned up in an instant, raining chunks of ash and stone. Now the room was open to the day. Wind gushed through the hole, a stiff cord of air, strong as a rampaging bull. It struck the soldiers and hearth-watchers, shoving them into a heap in the corner. The shriek of wind was loud enough to silence Selia's voice.

The air began rippling, so dense Rin could actually see the deadly columns of heat shooting from the hearth-watchers toward Isi. But Isi's wind thickened, pouring past Rin in great syrupy gusts. The wind ravaged through the waves of heat, breaking them apart and sending them swirling away. Sometimes the heat crashed against a wall and found a tapestry, and fires burst to life. But just as suddenly the fires died as if the wind had sucked the air out of them.

Rin spotted a soldier coming up the stairs, not caught in the corner with the others. He was making his way around the room, behind Isi's back.

"Isi!" Rin yelled, just as the soldier hurled a heavy metal box. Wind gushed between them and the box was knocked aside, missing Isi's head but thumping against her leg. She faltered, and the wind died for just a moment, but it was enough. The hearth-watchers jumped to their feet and split apart, and the soldiers ran forward with swords. Heat and steel were coming at Isi from every direction, seven fire-speakers and three warriors, all looking at Isi, all set on her death.

And Selia was still speaking, now in a high, piercing noise that barely cut through the wind. "Stop fighting, Crown Princess. It's useless! You'll get your little friend killed!"

Rin's guard still gripped her wrist. She wished she was in the dungeon, locked away in darkness where she would not have to see the queen of Bayern die. If only Enna were here instead of Rin—Enna would wipe out the entire room instead of cowering on the floor.

Isi kept pushing back the hearth-watchers and soldiers with her wind, occasionally letting small fires ignite a sword handle or scorch someone's boots. But they were gaining ground, and the closer they stood to Isi, the harder it was for her to blow away their shooting heat in time. The hem of Isi's skirt was smoking, her face was strained, her eyes sad. Rin believed Isi was holding back somehow—for fear of hurting them, or from the heavy strain of Selia's voice. Or perhaps knowing that Tusken was safe took the will to fight out of her. She defended herself with wind but she did not attack back with fire, and she left Selia alone.

Rin's hands tightened into fists. It was not right. Selia should not win. She had not been playing fair. Anyone who had ever so much as met Ma knew that you play fair or you do not play at all. People-speaking was no excuse for being a bully.

Rage crackled inside her, at Selia, at Isi. At herself. Why did she have to be so weak? The anger roiling through her limbs did not feel weak just then. And she thought of that tree, hacked away and assumed dead, yet still growing through stones, taking a chunk out of a fortress wall. Wind tears down trees, and new ones sprout again. Fire destroys forests, and they grow back. People chop them down to build their walls, and the trees reclaim the land. The thought made her feel wild—dangerous. If Isi could not take care of Selia, then she would.

Rin stood, meeting eyes with her guard. She had failed completely with the guard in the cell. She had asked too much—she could not wield such power as Selia, to make others believe the impossible. She did not have the will to speak lies or commands—it reminded her of what she'd done to Wilem, made her feel dark and greasy and used up. She could only tell what truth she had. What did this soldier want more than anything? To please his mistress. Rin could see that yearning in the faces of all her followers.

"Your mistress is very powerful, but so is the queen of Bayern. I'm holding you back. You could show Selia your devotion better if you didn't have to guard me. Why don't you join the fight?"

He blinked.

"I'm not going to run, I promise. I've nowhere to run. You can't help your mistress holding me. Let me go and I won't leave this room. Besides, I'm still shackled. What harm could I do?"

Her words seemed to make sense to him. He released her, drew his sword, and moved toward Isi.

Rin covered her mouth with her hands. *It worked. It worked.* She wanted to shout out in relief and weep in shame. Both would have to wait. She sat, grabbed the cooled knife off the floor, and holding it with both hands, sawed at the metal link. It was thin and a little misshapen from Isi's heat, but still intact. She twisted and bent, the effort making her sweat. Isi was at the center of a maelstrom, soldiers and hearth-watchers pressing in from all sides, Selia bellowing threats.

Come on, Rin thought. *That's your queen out there. Show Selia that Isi's subjects are stronger of their own will than her pack of fire-singed babies.*

Rin angled the knife again, scratching the link between blade and floor. The knife blade bent, slipping into a groove in the metal, a brittle spot that gave. Rin twisted her hands and her cuffed wrists separated.

Selia was screaming commands, and the anger in Rin bunched and quivered, eager to scream back. *No, not like Selia,* Rin told herself, pushing her anger to merge with her quiet places. Her thoughts twisted into ideas of aspens at the end of winter, done with resting and ready to move again. The burst of spring in a previously sleeping tree was as dramatic to Rin as the explosion of fire. She felt ready to spring.

With her thoughts stilled, her core strong, she was able to think clearly. She had to keep moving. Go forward. Stop Selia. There was a roomful of soldiers and hearth-watchers who would try to stop her. She could not let them.

Rin faced Selia and took a step. Isi's wind tangled in her skirt and whipped her dangling sleeves. Rin thought of how trees move in the wind, making small circles, bending. Roots moved too, so slowly that a root never bruised itself on a rock or scraped another root.

Warm, dark, wet soil, she thought. *Open sky above.*

Rin took another step.

No tree nearby to cling to, so instead she sank into herself as if into a tree's thoughts. But her eyes were open, she was still Rin, still aware. As she had done on her walk to the cage, Rin felt as if she existed in two places at once—safe inside the green world of a tree's thoughts, but still aware and moving in the human world. And this time panic did not eat at her. She felt perfectly balanced, half in, half out, and alive in both.

Everything seemed slowed, like a drip of sap fixed by cold weather. She had the time to see what was happening—the wind about to sweep back a

lock of Isi's hair, a bead of sweat dripping down a soldier's cheek, Selia's mouth opening to cry out.

She was aware of Selia speaking to her, the words rising in pitch. Orders to stop, to obey. They slid off her like rain off a leaf. At Selia's command, the four soldiers turned to Rin. The sounds of their boots seemed loud and distant at once. Rin took another step. One soldier aimed an arrow at her and released. The arrow was zipping toward her chest. In the time it took to lower her foot midstride, she watched the arrow, saw the gleaming point growing in size as it came nearer. She began to lean to one side, as those tall pines lean with the wind to keep from breaking. Rin would not break. On her chest she could feel the narrow push of air coming at her before the arrow. She kept leaning. The cold spot of air moved along her collar bone, her shoulder. Her body tipped just a little farther, and then the arrow itself whisked past. With a crack it lodged into the wall. Rin righted herself, faced Selia, and took another step.

Now she could feel new movements coming at her, the cool breath of air changing into heat. She could see the air ripple with bursts of fire-making heat from two hearth-watchers. This time she crouched, bringing her head against her chest, until she felt the tops of her hairs sizzle and heard the heat whoosh away into nothing, having found no fuel to turn into fire. Another blaze, and she leaned, just enough, rolling to her side and back onto her feet. Outside herself, she could feel the sting of pain across her leg. But such a little thing did not matter—a tree is not disturbed by the loss of a few leaves, the snap of a twig.

She took another step. Selia was yelling, but Rin did not hear a word. Another arrow came. She could see at a glance that the angle was wrong and would only scratch her shoulder, so she ignored it, the sliver of pain feeling as distant as home. Another column of heat and she bowed beneath it, and then the opposite of the heat—a cold tug as one of the hearth-watchers tried to pull her own heat out of her. But the tug could not find her or hold her, perhaps unsure if she were girl or tree, and she slid out of its pull. Now she was at the table, the false queen close enough to touch.

Selia's mouth was wet with rage, her eyes wide, surprised that her voice and her followers were failing. Her lips formed the word *stop,* but Rin had chosen not to hear.

I'm Forest born, she thought.

She pulled back her arm and punched Selia in the nose.

Rin meant to jab her in her throat to stop the talking, but Selia jerked away, and Rin's fist hit her nose instead. All the same, it had been a nice, firm strike, just as Razo had taught her. She had never punched a person before, and was surprised at the give beneath her knuckles as Selia's head moved back from the force. There was a tiny crunch under Rin's fist, a burst of pain in her knuckles. Selia bent over.

A hush of silence. Rin could feel everyone staring, the whole room twanging with tension.

"Ow," Selia said with a pathetic whine. She cradled her bleeding nose, stomping her foot for the pain.

Rin looked at the soldiers and hearth-watchers—they gaped, frozen by this action, surprise and confusion on their faces, as if they had believed Selia was untouchable, as if they had not known her body contained any blood at all.

Rin twisted to see Isi, who was a few paces behind, her stare as bewildered as the others. Why wasn't anyone doing anything? Rin had not thought through her actions farther than the strike, but clearly that was not going to be enough.

The stunned pause lasted only a moment before Selia began to screech so loudly it made the insides of Rin's ears stretch.

"Dem," Selia sputtered through her bloodied hands, gesticulating madly at Isi and Rin. "Kih dem!" And the hearth-watchers and soldiers sprang for Isi again.

"You need to stop talking!" Rin shoved Selia, knocking her down. She kneed her in the lower back, grabbed a fistful of hair, and yanked with all her strength. Selia shrieked wordlessly. This was dirty grappling that would earn a paddle with Ma's wooden spoon back home but Rin was enjoying it. When Selia tried to squirm out of her hold, Rin kicked the back of her knees and kept hold of her hair.

Rin looked up at the scene. All seven hearth-watchers and four soldiers had their eyes on Rin, straining to get to their mistress. The soldiers no longer held weapons, the bows burned to ash and the swords too hot to hold, but they were bullying their way through Isi's windstorm while the hearth-watchers attacked the wind with heat and tried to set fire to Isi herself. The hearth-watchers fought as if especially crazed, their expressions grotesque in their delirium to protect Selia. The attack pushed Isi back until she was standing directly in front of Rin and Selia.

Selia bawled as Rin pressed her shackled wrist against the back of Selia's neck, shoving the woman's face to the ground. Rin could not let Isi lose. She stared at the door, wishing Enna and Dasha would come bursting through.

The reminder of her own uselessness struck her like a blow, and Rin's grip on Selia loosened for just a moment. Selia lurched out of her hold and sprang to her feet. Rin reached to tackle her again but hesitated, her attention straying to Isi. Selia was insignificant beside the true queen. Letting Selia flee to her hearth-watchers, Rin put her hands on Isi instead.

Tell her the truth.

"Isi, you're stronger than the lot of them. Isi, you're the queen. Selia's nothing. Her lies can't shackle you. Tusken needs his ma, and so does Bayern. You have a right to live."

Isi's eyes widened.

Rin nodded. "You can end this."

Selia positioned herself behind Nuala and the others. "Kih hah!" she yelled thickly, her hands over her nose and mouth.

But Isi shook her head once. Outside, a sizzle of lightning, a gush of rain. And in the chamber, everyone fell, clutching their throats and chests as if desperate for air. Then the wind struck.

This was a storm that could uproot trees and tear houses from the ground, and it ravaged inside that one small room. It pushed at the people on the ground, rolling them over and over, sending them sprawling back into the corner. The furniture followed, tables and chairs and sofas banging against them, trapping them against the wall. As the small ornate table took flight toward the others, the document Isi had not signed rose into the wind, its corners flapping as if it were a white bird on the wing. It dissolved into flame and ash.

Rin should have fallen over too. But she felt the wind weave around her, pass through her fingers, arch over her as if she were made of leaves. She bent and flowed and did not fall.

The soldiers and hearth-watchers were packed into the corner, chairs and tables pinning them down and back. But Selia had slipped away. She sprang for the stairs.

Isi's wind slammed the door to the stairs shut, then fire poured into it, burning any escape. Selia fled to one of the four inner chamber doors, screaming hysterically, but then that door was blazing too.

The fire in the door to the stairs extinguished, and someone from the stair side kicked through, shattering the charred wood like glass. Through the rising smoke rushed Enna and Dasha, looking for a place to attack. From behind them soldiers clambered up the stairs, shouting a battle cry in Kelish, the high lilt bringing goose bumps to Rin's arms. Before the soldiers reached the landing, they dropped their flaming weapons and tripped over their now-sodden clothes. *That was Enna and Dasha's doing,* Rin thought, but as the soldiers stumbled into the chamber, it was Isi's wind that shoved them into the others.

"Watch them," Isi said, pointing to the heap of people and furniture in the corner.

Enna and Dasha nodded, and water began to flow over the hearth-watchers, down their heads, soaking their clothes, making a pool on the ground around them. Enna stood on one side of the cage of furniture and Dasha on the other, hands twitching as if ready to attack at any provocation, eyes roving over Isi and Selia, trying to determine if things were settled yet.

One of the soldier's hands strayed to a dagger in his boot. Enna kicked him in the ribs. "Try it and this fire-haired Tiran fiend will drown you where you sit."

The hearth-watchers recoiled, wiping at the water oozing down their faces, blubbering anxiously, some reaching for their mistress.

Rin jumped to her feet and put herself between Selia and the now-open entrance to the stairs, her hands in fists. The look of terror on Selia's face almost made Rin laugh. Half-hysterical, Selia began circling, frantic for an escape. Selia's clothes and hair were whipping around her body, and if she was yelling commands to her trapped followers, the wind circling her face swallowed the sounds.

"You are never going to touch my family again," Isi said, her voice cold and firm. She still had not moved from the center of the room. "You will let me bind your hands and mouth and you'll come quietly with me back to a cozy Bayern prison, or . . ." Wind nudged a barrel that had been pushed aside in the windstorm and rolled it to rest at Selia's feet. "Or I'll fetch some nails and a couple of horses, and we can take care of this right now."

Selia kicked the barrel away and swatted at the wind as if at bees. Her lips were moving, chanting something, and she flung herself about. Her running seemed frantic and without thought until suddenly she was at the

narrow window, just wide enough for one person to fit through. Selia clawed her way onto the sill.

Rin heard Isi gasp with surprise, and wind swept through the window, trying to push Selia back into the room. But she did not pause before flinging herself out.

The wind hushed. With hurried bursts of steam, water gathered over the fires and fell in puffs, so in moments the room that had been filled with burning and whipping chaos was calmed to silence.

Enna and Rin ran to the window while Isi turned a glare at the soldiers and hearth-watchers buried under furniture. Rin doubted that through the clutter and wind they'd seen what had just happened.

"I am not feeling jovial at this precise moment," Isi said. "So let me make this clear. You move to attack any one of us, and you're a bonfire. Nod your heads if you understand me."

There was some general head nodding. The hearth-watchers were searching the room with their eyes, looking for Selia. Some began to wail in Kelish.

"Dasha, if they so much as twitch . . ."

Dasha nodded. Her eyes never left her captives. "I am in such a mood. I feel positively unhinged. Did you know I could fill your lungs with water? It's a trick I long to show the first of you who twitches aggressively."

Enna was leaning out the window, craning to get a view. "Um, Isi . . ."

Isi waited until she was near Enna, her back to the captives, before asking quietly, "The serpent got away, didn't she?"

"Actually, no. She . . . no. Her life heat . . . it's gone. There's no chance she lived through this one."

Rin put a hand on Enna's shoulder and stood on her toes. She could just see Selia's pink skirt fanned out above her bare feet. The fall had knocked off her slippers.

"I have to see," said Isi, "or I won't sleep again for worrying that she's sneaking into Tusken's room."

Still, she hesitated a moment before getting close enough to lean out the window. While she'd been attacking, she'd seemed regal, impervious. Now she looked very human again, slight even, and sorry.

Isi's voice dipped low. "Do you think she died quickly?"

"I'd been rooting for an excruciatingly slow and terrifically painful end for our fair queen of Kel, but yes, I'd say she hit those stones headfirst and

was gone before her feet caught up."

Dasha, too far from the window to hear the exchange, looked inquiringly at Rin. Rin nodded her head, yes, Selia was dead. Dasha's shoulders relaxed.

"It makes you wonder, though," said Enna, still staring out the window, "what she was thinking there at the end. Seemed like she was shouting something, and I can't help wondering . . ."

"I heard it." Isi leaned her elbow on the sill, wrenching her gaze from Selia's body up to the afternoon horizon. "She said, 'I will die a queen.' "

Rin shuddered.

"Sick in the head," said Enna. "I've said that all along. Sick. In. The. Head."

"How did you get out?" asked Isi.

"A page told us he heard fighting upstairs, so we couldn't just sit there. Dasha had been sending water into the masonry around the door for the past couple of days. Loosened a rock. A few good kicks and we were free. I was going to try to burn through the lock, but the whole door is metal . . ." Enna shrugged. "I still think I could've done it, but I admit, she was clever working at it the way she did."

One of the hearth-watchers spoke in Kelish and the wailing turned into rejoicing. Another pointed at Isi and said, "She is gone now, you are never for finding her. And she will coming for us and we are being her chosen again!"

Enna whispered, "Doubt that."

Isi headed for the burned-out door. "Rin, come with me please. Enna, Dasha, can you . . . ?" She inclined her head toward the heap of prisoners.

"Yes, of course," Enna started, "but—"

"She's going to get Tusken," Rin explained as she ran after the queen. She did not dare say anything about Razo until she was sure. "We'll be a few hours."

Chapter 26

Rin sped after Isi, leaping down stairs and sweeping past sentries. If a soldier challenged Isi, his weapon blazed in his hands. To the gate guards, Isi said, “Selia, the so-called queen of Kel, is dead.”

Rin could see the guards knew it was true. Selia’s body must have been spotted and news was spreading around the keep. Their eyes were hot with sorrow and mistrust. But Isi did not flinch.

“I am Queen Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee of Bayern, friend to King Scandlan. In his name, I reclaim Castle Daire for Kel. I will hold this fortress for your sovereign, and any who oppose my authority or that of my three companions will be stripped of his rank and cast in the dungeon to await the king’s verdict. Send your quickest messenger to Bressal to inform Scandlan of his bride’s fate and request his presence here. Now please fetch me three horses.”

Nobody moved. There was a significant amount of staring going on.

Isi sighed. She pointed to the young page with the skin spots who was peering around the corridor. “You. Are you capable of riding messenger to Bressal?”

He nodded, his eyes bright. Isi turned a questioning look at Rin, and she nodded too—he seemed trustworthy.

“I don’t have time to write a formal letter. Just be as straightforward as you know how. Tell King Scandlan what you’ve seen here, and tell him I respectfully request his presence. Now climb on a horse.” She pointed to the soldier closest to the gate. “And you, unlock this girl’s shackles, then prepare three horses, fast movers saddled to ride.”

Isi did not have people-speaking. Her words did not affect Rin as Selia’s had, slide into her head and make her itch to believe and obey. But when Isi spoke, Rin had no doubt she was in the presence of a queen. Neither, apparently, did the gate guard. He fumbled for a key from his belt to click open Rin’s wrist clamps then fled toward the stables.

Rin breathed through a smile as she and Isi followed, a rush of elation making her limbs tingle. It had been frightening in the moment, but now she felt swept away and flying. Isi was amazing, Rin had done . . . something, and it had felt so good. Hope was thick in her chest. With relief came the

awareness of her injuries: burns on her leg and the insides of her wrists, a scratch on her shoulder from an arrow, and bruised knuckles from punching Selia. There did not seem to be a spot on her body free of ache.

Soon they were mounted and riding north, a third horse trotting behind on a lead rope.

"Can you hear what all horses think?" Rin asked, between hurried bites of the bread they'd borrowed from the stablehands' supply. Her stomach groaned pathetically.

"No, I can only speak with my own horse. I was present at his birth and formed that initial bond. But having communication with my horse has helped me to understand all of them, at least in part. Not their language, but their meaning."

"So can you tell whether or not this horse is plotting my death?"

Isi laughed. Perhaps Isi thought Rin was joking, but Rin could not help notice that she did not answer the question.

As they got closer to where Rin had left Razo, Isi gripped her reins, her focus dead ahead. Rin's middle was icy with anticipation. She let her hands graze tree branches and trunks as they hurried past. Two days in a stone dungeon had felt like two years.

Isi's gaze whipped to the side, and Rin looked, hoping to see Razo's face. Instead a stranger on horse back cantered through the trees—a soldier, his weapon raised. He yelled in Kelish but his sword turned red hot and fell from his hand, then wind knocked him out of his saddle and onto the ground. Two companions flanked him, and they too were soon on their backsides in the bracken.

Isi stayed mounted, tall above them. "Do you speak the western tongue? Good. Then hear this: your search is off. I am Queen Anidori-Kiladra of Bayern. Your former mistress is dead, your king is coming to Daire. Go back to the castle and await his arrival."

Their eyes darted to their cooling swords, as if planning a new attack. Isi sighed.

"Will you tell them, Rin?" Isi's question and look were so direct, Rin had no doubt of Isi's meaning. She guessed that Rin was a people-speaker. And that made Rin want to scratch up a blanket of moss and pull it over her head.

She took a breath to steady her shivers and studied the soldiers' faces a moment before speaking.

“Did you love your queen of Kel?”

The soldiers’ attention was wholly hers.

“You did love her. But she was not made for a long life. You felt that, didn’t you? That this couldn’t last. That her reign had to be brief, a fire that burns too hot. She’s dead. You were true servants to her, but your service is over now. Time to go back to the castle, to mourn and await the king. You’ll have a new service, and it’ll be even more important than your time with the queen of Kel.”

Rin could see they believed her words, but they had to decide to act on them. One by one, they picked up their fallen weapons, mounted their horses, and rode south.

As soon as the third soldier was gone, Isi nudged her horse forward.

“So, Rin . . .” Isi seemed anxious as she scanned the trees, eager to talk just to relieve her nerves. Rin tensed for a question about people-speaking, but instead Isi asked, “What do you think of Kel?”

“Kel? Nice, I guess, but they need larger dungeons.”

Isi smiled. “You seem different now. More ready to speak.”

“Sorry,” Rin said, her face hot.

“Oh no, please don’t be sorry! I admire you for sharing your thoughts. It’s hard for me to talk casually, I worry so much about saying the wrong thing, offending. I’ve often wished along with understanding birds and horses I had people-speaking, a talent that could bring me closer to people.”

“Closer? But look what it did to Selia.”

“She was overcome by it. Selia might have learned another language herself if she ever held still to listen. But she was too busy talking. To be more aware of other people, to see through lies and fear and really comprehend a person—that should be a noble gift. People-speakers like Selia, they let their desires lead them, burn them up. They don’t have balance. Though I don’t know what could balance people-speaking.”

“Nothing,” said Rin.

“Balance with any gift of speaking is essential, but especially, I think, with people and nature. With nature-speaking, you have to be the master. Change the wind or fire, change the water or trees, don’t let them change you. Animal-speaking is different—I can’t control my horse, can’t order him the way Enna and I command the wind. I just listen. I’m just happy to understand. Same with the birds. I speak with them, but they aren’t a tool I can use. By understanding, I’m the one who’s changed.”

“Trees are more animal than nature, then.”

Isi nodded, her expression surprised. “I guess that’s so—trees are living things, like animals. The living things have no master, the living things change the person who understands them.”

Then I’m the one who’s changed, Rin thought, but she said, “People are living, too.”

“I don’t imagine Selia gave that much thought. People-speaking tends to warp, makes the speaker want to be the master of people, to control, not to listen. But if there was someone who was careful and didn’t try to control everything, just understood, just listened . . . if there was someone who could do that . . .”

Someone like you, Rin thought. This queen was the kind of person who could be a people-speaker and not devolve into Selia, who could know all the languages and contain them. Rin did not think that even if she lived beside Isi for the rest of her life, she could learn how to be like the queen.

Isi seemed about to say something else when her attention snapped forward. She nudged her horse into a gallop.

“Tusken? Tuksen!” She dismounted, not bothering to tie up her horse, and rushed forward. “Tusken? Ma’s here. Tusken, honey boy?”

There was a two-year-old shriek, and Tusken came streaking out of the brush with arms wide. He rammed into his mother, and she laughed as she fell to the ground, Tusken on top of her.

“Ma!” he yelled. “Ma, Ma, Ma, Ma!”

Isi held him and held him, burying her face in his neck, rocking him and squeezing him and kissing his head, rubbing her tears into his hair, all the while saying, “Oh, I love you, I love you so much, and you’re all right, you’re all right.”

Razo sauntered out of the trees, hands in his pockets, seemingly unworried, though Rin could see he’d been near frantic before they came. “Knew you’d do it, though you took your time, eh, Rinny-binny? I was going to strike out for Bayern tomorrow—”

Then Rin was hugging him. Relief and joy swelled inside her till she thought she would burst.

“Uh . . . ,” Razo said, patting her head as if she might be crazy.

“You were dead,” she mumbled against his chest.

“I was? Well, I wish someone had told me. Would’ve been nice to relax on my back for a while. Um, how’d I die?”

“Selia said you were fleeing from her soldiers and your sling was no match for a sword.”

“Ha! Then she’s never seen me sling.”

“Isi died too, but just for a minute.”

Razo shook his head. “What’ve you girls been up to? I hate it when I miss all the good action.”

Rin hugged him tighter, enjoying the feel of his ribs rising and lowering with a breath, the heat of his heart coming through his chest, and considered that a brother, a living big brother, was the best, safest, greatest thing in all the world.

Razo groaned and Rin released him, remembering his broken rib. “Sorry.”

He shrugged. “A little pain is the least I deserve for dying on you.”

“That is so true.”

It was not long before Tusken had enough of holding still in his mother’s embrace. He squirmed away, took her hand and said, “Up, Ma. Up.”

“Can’t keep him out of the trees,” said Razo. “He’s a Forest boy at heart, no question there. Isi, you’d best come stay with my ma or Finn’s ma at least, let Tusken get in some climbing. Those showy little shrubs you have in your gardens are a good joke, but this boy needs a real challenge.” Razo pointed to a towering evergreen. “You should see him go!”

“Razo,” Rin said sternly. “You didn’t let him climb that tree, did you?”

Razo’s expression froze, mouth wide. He glanced at Isi, then back to Rin. “No. No! Of course not. Because that tree’s way too high for a two-year-old. Right? Way too high. We just . . . just looked at that one. In an admiring sort of way. From afar. And climbed those bitty squatty ones over there, is all.”

But Tusken had dragged his mother by the hand to the base of the monstrous evergreen, reaching for the lowest branch and saying, “Up. Up.”

“Razo,” Rin hissed.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” he whispered back. “The boy’s a climber. He’s got the balance of a bird and the hands of a squirrel, not to mention stubbornness equal to our Enna.”

They rode unchallenged through the gates of Castle Daire just as the sun grazed the western horizon. Some of the soldiers even saluted. Rin tumbled off her horse, grabbed Razo’s hand and half-dragged him, making for the winding stairs. But Isi said, “No, they’re outside,” so Rin veered toward the

courtyard, passing from the dark stone castle back into the luminous sunset. She could not move quickly enough. Her heart thrummed with excitement.

Half of the courtyard was soaked in yellow light, the leaves in the kitchen garden rimmed with gold as if trying on autumn tones. A group of people stood in the distance, but for all the rich light, Rin could not tell orange hair from black.

"Dasha!" she yelled. "Dasha!"

A face looked up. Then two. They started walking toward her, then running. Dasha was in front, her eyes set on Razo, her face caught in an expression of desperate hope.

"Razo," she said, panting as if she had been running from very far away. "Razo, it had better be you. If it just looks like you, I am going to kill you. It had better—"

He'd reached her by then. They embraced, and he swung her around, her legs lifting in the air, her tunic swirling. She laughed high and so pleased Rin thought she could break glass with that sound. Then Dasha was kissing Razo's face and crying and smiling and declaring all his perfections.

"Well, this isn't half-bad," said Razo. "I think I'll die more often."

Rin was so happy she could not help bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Enna was staring, at Razo, at Rin, at Isi with Tusken in her arms, her eyes so wide as if she did not dare believe what she saw. "But what . . . ?" she said. "But how . . . ?"

Isi said, "Selia lied. He was never caught."

Enna leaned her head back and laughed at the sky. "Of course he wasn't! What could kill Razo?"

Dasha embraced him again and squeezed until Razo had to admit that he was injured. "Love the lips, not the ribs," he said, and pulled her into a long kiss.

From the midst of the group of people just beyond the garden, a fire was blazing, its smoke black and ugly against the golden sky.

"What's happening there?" asked Isi.

Enna grimaced. "The hearth-watchers. It's their funeral pyre."

Isi's eyes flashed to Enna, her expression full of frightened disbelief. Rin had to wonder too—had Enna killed them?

"Not me," Enna said, her smile sad that she would need to assure them. "Not me, Isi."

"No, of course not. But what happened?"

“Later,” Dasha said, still smiling up at Razo, holding his arm around her waist. “Right now let’s go eat and celebrate and gaze at Razo some more. And sleep. In a bed! How would that be? No one will threaten our peace to night unless they fancy a swim in dry air. We can talk about the unpleasant parts in the morning.”

Unsure whom they could trust among the castle servants, Isi dismissed the kitchen workers and steward for a couple of hours. Isi and Tusken sat on the kitchen floor, playing with pots. Dasha and Razo tried to cut vegetables, but stopped so often to tickle each other or whisper or kiss, Enna finally wrenched the knives away and did it herself. Rin helped, and they all dined on a good Forest meal. As they ate on the floor, Razo recounted his past days with tense narrative and plenty of dramatic pauses. Isi in turn told some of their time in the castle, but before she could recount her confrontation with Selia, Tusken had fallen asleep in Isi’s arms, so she declared it well past bedtime.

The six of them took up residence in Selia’s sleeping chamber, housed in one of the four side towers on the third floor. The bed was round like the room and large enough to fit most of them. After all her longing for a bed, Dasha said she’d grown used to the ground, and she and Razo curled up on the rug, their arms around each other. Razo was snoring in moments, and Dasha giggled with delight. The fire sisters agreed to take turns at watch, in case any of the castle servants or soldiers thought to get rid of their Bayern guests before King Scandlan arrived. Isi insisted on first watch.

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep for some time anyhow. I can stay happily occupied just staring at Tusken till dawn.”

“You’d better wake me before then,” Enna said, yawning.

Rin lay beside Enna, her arm curled over the edge of the bed, and thought there was no chance she would be able to fall asleep. Her burns sang out, her bruised middle groaned, her mind was afire with things Selia had said. But the sounds of Razo’s snores were oddly lulling, and the occasional murmur of Tusken in his sleep made her feel dreamy with contentment. Despite lying in the bed of the woman who’d tried to kill them in a castle where she’d been a prisoner, Rin was not afraid, not with Isi keeping watch. So she closed her eyes, feeling as safe as if she’d crawled inside the trunk of a great old oak, and dreamed of the soft breath of leaves.

Chapter 27

When Rin woke, a smear of sunlight draped the bed, warming her feet. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. At the sound, Enna stirred, Isi leaned up on her elbow, and Dasha arose from where she had been keeping guard at the door.

Dasha gestured with her head toward the antechamber, and Isi nodded.

Isi extricated herself from the sleeping Tusken, stacking pillows around him so he would not roll off the bed. Dasha threw a blanket over Razo, so deeply asleep he did not twitch. The door had been burned through, allowing Isi to still keep an eye on her son from the other room, and the girls gathered half-charred cushions and rolled-up rugs. They made themselves comfortable sprawled in the center of the chamber, looking up through the rip in the roof at the sweetly blue sky. Rin found it strange, lying there in the wreckage as if in a copse of aspens with the chores done early and nothing to do until dinner.

Isi spoke first. "I find it very valuable that the Tiran ambassador observed all this. It might prove uncomfortable with King Scandlan if the queen of Bayern were the only witness to the mysterious death of his bride."

"I was thinking the same during my watch this morning," said Dasha. "There is a grave risk Scandlan will hold Bayern in blame."

"Hold Bayern in blame . . ." Enna scowled. "What about that fact that his wife kidnapped the prince of Bayern and imprisoned Bayern's queen, and the Tiran ambassador too?"

"A man who would marry Selia might not be able to see a situation clearly," said Isi.

"Then I'll help him see it clearly," Enna said. "That hussy is the reason Geric's scarred, Brynn's dead, we spent an inhospitable amount of time in a dungeon, and I'm still not married to Finn."

Rin noticed Isi flinch at the reminder of Brynn, but she said nothing about it, asking instead, "What did you do with her body?"

"It's in the crypt. I wanted to make a nice fire for it, but Dasha thought the king should see the evidence." Enna sat up, her face brightening with a new idea. "Isi, can I go find the corpse and kick it in the shins?"

"No!"

“Fine. I wasn’t serious anyway. Not really.” She rolled onto her side and muttered against her arm, “It’s just that I never got a chance to kick her in the shins.”

Dasha was staring at Enna. “That’s just . . . that’s creepy, Enna.”

Enna sat back up. “You know what’s creepy? A woman who can convince everyone to do what she wants, and what she wants is to be queen of the world and take a little boy from his mother, and the only friends she has are so out-of-their-mind in love with her that they’d burn themselves alive rather than go on without her. *That’s* creepy.”

Dasha nodded. “Good point.”

“Is that what happened to Selia’s hearth-watchers?” Rin asked. “They burned themselves?”

Dasha and Enna looked at each other, as if waiting for the other to speak first. Finally Enna groaned again and threw her hands into the air.

“They were as insane as their mistress, obviously. Dasha was keeping them nice and soaked so they couldn’t burn us, and I was . . . uh, nudging them along, trying to get them out of here and down into the dungeon. One of them got too close to the window and . . .” Enna frowned. “I didn’t realize how they’d react to her death, or I would’ve used stronger tactics to keep them away from the window. But when one of them saw the body, she started to wail, ‘The queen is dead.’ She was crazed, I mean, tearing-out-her-own-hair crazed, then she flung herself at the window and was gone. Dasha and I were . . . we were so surprised—”

“It happened really fast,” Dasha muttered.

“Four of them threw themselves out the window before I could get enough wind coming through it to keep them back. The others weren’t happy about that. ‘We have to join our lady,’ and such stuff, and moaning, and hitting their heads, and then . . .”

Enna paused, then looked at Dasha, as if to say, *It’s your turn*.

Dasha winced. “When they couldn’t jump out the window, they burned themselves up. Between my water and Enna’s wind, they couldn’t throw heat away from their body, but it would seem they could still pull it in . . . and keep it in. They died really quickly, but it was . . . not nice.”

Rin shuddered and looked into the pulsing blue of the sky to keep from imagining it.

Enna said, “Please can we not think about that anymore? For a while, huh? I was really enjoying the morning for once. Razo’s alive and Tusken’s

safe and . . . and can't we think about something pleasant?"

"I have a question." Dasha examined the print of the rug under her hands as if the pattern was more interesting than her own thoughts. "You did not tell us all last night, Isi. How did you overcome Selia?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I wouldn't have by myself. After Rin said Tusken was safe, I wasn't afraid to fight those fire-speakers, but Selia . . . her voice still nagged me, and I just couldn't get myself to attack her. Then Rin . . ."

Isi looked at Rin as if asking permission, and Rin shrugged.

"Rin did it for me. She moved . . . it's hard to explain. She walked across the room as casual as anything, but nothing could touch her—not arrows, not fire. It was mesmerizing."

Dasha and Enna stared at Rin, waiting for an explanation.

"I have tree-speaking."

"Oh," Enna said, nodding, as unruffled by that declaration as if she'd just mentioned she had a flea bite on her ankle.

"So . . ." Dasha looked up, her brow creased. "So you spoke to the trees and—"

"No. I mean, there were no trees around. I don't actually *speak* to trees anyway. But I listen, and maybe because of all that watching and listening over the years I just know stuff about trees that made me realize that something else was possible."

She described falling into the memories of the oak tree and realizing that trees do not comprehend time. They just exist, everything slow and careful, past and present intertwined. So for a few moments she'd walked half in the green world, seeing everything at once, moving like a tree that sways in the wind to avoid breaking.

"It seemed the right moment, the right thing to do," said Rin. "But to be honest, I don't really understand what I did, or if I could do it again."

"Don't leave out the best part," said Isi, explaining the rest.

"Wait—you punched Selia in the nose?" Enna stared at Rin, her wide mouth turning into a huge grin. "You are my girl! So why didn't we wake Rin for a turn at watch last night? She can handle anything if she stopped Selia."

"But I can't. I couldn't do enough. Then I saw in Isi . . ." She blushed, embarrassed to describe what she thought. "I saw how powerful she is. And I tried to speak the truth of it to her, so she'd know all that she can do." The words did not make sense outside her head, so she shrugged again. Besides,

adding more detail might bring up people-speaking, and admitting that part was about as enticing as cutting off her own finger.

"So, Isi . . ." Enna peered at her friend with one eye. "How much exactly can you do?"

Isi winced. "Some. When Rin said Razo was alive and Tusken was safe, it was as if half of the chains binding me just fell away. But I was . . . hesitant, I still couldn't do enough. I guess Selia's talking had hammered away at me, so that I didn't think I had anything left. But then Rin spoke again, and I just understood. Not that I was strong, but that everything else was, the wind and the heat in the air, if I could just allow them to speak to each other through me.

"And there was another motivation. Just as I was about to attack again, I heard on the wind that you and Dasha were coming up the stairs. I didn't want you to have to do anything. Not that I think you actually could kill anyone, you're so bad at it. But just in case."

Enna smirked, but there was understanding in her eyes, a softness.

"You are . . ." Dasha's eyes were wide. "Isi, you and Rin completely incapacitated four soldiers, seven fire-speakers, and an extremely powerful people-speaker?"

"Not me," said Rin. "I just watched. And knocked Selia. Isi did the rest."

Isi glanced at Enna, her expression a little nervous. "Is that all right?"

Rin understood the uncertainty in Isi's voice. Enna had always been the strongest one. She'd stopped the invading Tiran army, she was so dangerous the best soldiers stood down when she was in the room. It was Enna's place to be powerful, while Isi was the queen. And Isi did not want to take that away from her friend.

Enna stared up at the charred roof, then a chuckle growled out of her throat.

"What?" said Isi. "What? Share your humor, Enna. I could really use a laugh right now."

"I was just thinking . . . if Geric thinks you're, you know, especially attractive when you're angry, how'll he react when he hears about this? You should probably tell him at a time when you two are conveniently alone and sentries have been given orders not to disturb . . ."

Isi blushed and sputtered and looked as if she would order Enna to hush up, but when she opened her mouth all she could do was giggle.

Enna said, "Rinna-girl, we need to find you a suitor."

“No thanks,” she said, and she meant it. She could not trust herself to get as close to someone as Isi was to Geric, not with the canker of people-speaking inside her. No loss, she assured herself. One time her brother Sten imitated the sound of a squirrel emitting gas, and all six brothers had laughed to tears. Honestly—to tears. It made Rin wonder about the sanity of her brothers’ wives, since they chose such boys as mates.

“Conrad told me he thought you were nice,” Isi said.

“Ha,” said Rin.

Enna elbowed her. “You’ll change your mind soon enough. Just make sure you choose a good Forest boy.”

“No, no, trust me,” said Isi, “one of the Gerhard clan is the way to go. I wonder if any of Geric’s cousins—”

“Sorry, I have to agree with Enna here, Your Majesty,” said Dasha. “Forest boys are far superior to your city stock, no matter how fine the breeding.”

“That’s right,” said Enna. “They’re not dull and worried about dirtying their fine silk tunics. Not that Geric’s that way *necessarily,* but Forest boys are ready for anything, well-tumbled and apt to climb.”

Dasha was nodding emphatically. “And they love their mothers, the truest of sons, which is so sweet.”

“And just smart enough—not bookish and silly with big words, just as smart as you want them to be.”

“And they are loyal, completely loyal and faithful and true and—”

“And they know how to cook a mean stew—”

Dasha raised one finger. “Ooh, and skin a squirrel! Because . . . you never know when you might need to skin a squirrel.”

“Right. And they know how to love.”

“It’s all true.”

“Every word.” Enna really looked at Dasha. “You’re agreeing with me. Great crows, we see eye to eye, on this matter at least. Pinch me, someone, so I can—*ouch!* What’re you doing?”

Dasha batted her eyelashes innocently. “You did say to pinch you.”

Part Four



The Forest

Chapter 28

By the next day, Isi had put Castle Daire in order—meals had a schedule, watch rotations were precise and well manned, and the roof over Selia's antechamber was ringing with hammers and the shouts of workmen. Isi kept Rin beside her as she interviewed each member of the house hold, watchful for those who were full of Selia's voice and might, for instance, consider crushing poisonous berries into Isi's dinner.

In the afternoon, Rin was in the courtyard practicing slinging with Razo and Dasha when a sentry announced approaching horse men. The three ran out as a small group of Bayern soldiers gained the wall's gate.

"Ho there, you lazy brigands!" Razo shouted. "What have you been doing these past days, polishing your boots while the girls and I take down a tyrant?"

Two horse men galloped ahead of the rest, and Rin recognized Geric and Finn.

"Does anyone smell roasting meat?" said Razo. "Oh, wait, it's just Geric's face."

Dasha nudged his arm and spoke low. "It is not seemly to talk that way about a king before his men."

"Men? It's just Finn."

The king's head was no longer bandaged except for a thin band over his left eye, but the skin along his left side was red and puffy.

"Is Tusken here? And Isi?" shouted Geric.

"They are, Your Majesty," Dasha answered. "Both here and well."

Much of the pain in Geric's face seemed to go away. "What's happened?"

Razo rubbed his hands together, gleeful with the news. "You'll never guess, King Scarhead—*oof*!" He rubbed his arm where Dasha had just elbowed him, then cleared his throat. "You'll never guess. So I'll tell you. You have to be really ready, though. Are you ready? It was . . . *Selia*."

"What?" Finn stood up in his stirrups.

"Selia?" Geric leaned forward on his horse, gaping. "But . . . the Selia who was dead?"

Razo beamed. "Well, she's dead now. Some folk you have to kill twice. Like me, for instance. It seems—"

But the castle gate was opening, and in a streak of yellow and blue Isi was running, and Geric was dismounting and running too. He grabbed Tusken first from her arms, hugging him and tossing him in the air.

Finn leaped from his horse to greet Enna, and she entwined herself into him, their arms around each other, their faces close. Though they did not kiss, Rin thought that the way they looked at each other was even more intimate.

It's too bad Finn doesn't have a brother, Rin thought, then stung with the thought.

"Let's get married," Enna was saying with yearning in her voice. "Please, let's get married right now."

Finn put his face into her neck and whispered something that made her hum.

I don't really need my own Finn, thought Rin, feeling her face go hot. *It's no loss.*

Still, over the next few days, Rin let the thought wander through her mind from time to time. Sometimes she imagined a boy who was nice, who was curious about what the trees thought, who might hold her hand and walk with her under the Forest canopy. The way Enna talked about Finn sometimes made Rin want to climb a tree and never come down. But other times she felt a curious flutter tickle her heart, and a longing seize her belly. A nice boy who would like to be Agget-kin too, and build a seventh house in the homestead, where she could embrace her ma again, play with the little ones, live under the trees she knew, be Rin and be at home.

It never took long for the hope to snap. The memory of Selia was like seeing herself reflected in watery glass.

King Scandlan arrived a few days after Geric. He had thick lips constantly parted in confused amazement, and eyes that were lined and sad. He went straight to the crypt, where he knelt beside Selia's body and wept. Like a thunderstorm she must have come in, brilliant and frightening, and made the world seem beautiful in a new way. And then she'd left him in silence. Rin could see that Scandlan was not soothed by the quiet after the storm.

She sat on the steps that led to the crypt, her arms around her knees, listening to the echo of the king's throat-cracking sobs. The smell was all of dungeon.

She stood, poised to go down to the king, words and the sounds of words scampering in her mind. She had things to say.

An image of Selia handing scissors to Cilie burned in Rin's mind. She fled back upstairs.

But she found herself hovering about all day, outside the king's chamber, near his table at supper, watching him. A king, a man of greatness, ruler of Kel, brought to his knees by Selia. By a people-speaker. Fascination and horror battled inside Rin. She could not look away. And still the words danced.

The day after his arrival, Isi, Geric, and Dasha counseled with Scandlan in one of the side chambers on the third floor. Rin played with Tusken in the central chamber, the roof now solid above them. The door slammed open, and the king of Kel stormed out.

"She was my wife," Scandlan said, his lips quivering. "I know she would not do the things you say she did. You break into my fortress, kill my queen, and expect me to throw a banquet!"

Isi and Geric watched him go.

Dasha sighed. "He is haunted by Selia. After seeing what those hearth-watchers did to themselves, it makes me wonder . . . did her people-speaking leave permanent damage? Maybe those who were closest to Selia will never recover."

"That would be a tragedy for anyone," said Geric. "But for the king of Kel, it's dangerous."

Rin shuddered, as if she could feel the taint of people-speaking slide through her, a thick black snake tense in her throat. Dasha might be right. Cilie sat in the dungeon now. When she'd heard of her mistress's death, instead of trying to escape, the abandoned waiting woman had taken a knife and cut off her own hair.

Lord Forannan and Lady Giles, the original denizens of the castle, returned from their brief exile in the town of Daire. That night they organized a feast for their sovereign, enlisting twelve town men to perform the hummers dance. The men wore sacks over their heads painted with grotesque faces, red eyes wide, red lips in exaggerated smiles and sneers. One sack face was blank.

The dancers' wooden swords sliced and dove as the men jumped and rolled, rocked and swung in complicated maneuvers, almost touching and

always escaping. Women sat to the sides, beating drums in a hard, throbbing rhythm, and the dancers hummed a tune more animal than human.

Rin watched Scandlan. His gaze followed the dancer with the blank face, his own eyes wide and red lips parted as if painted on. The drums beat faster. The dance grew more intense, the men blinded by their sacks still moving together, ducking from the slice of wooden swords, sword against sword whacking in time, one, two, three, and again, their shirts stained with sweat, the drums even faster and dancing so quickly it seemed impossible they would escape the touch, but again they ducked, rocked, spun, and escaped, one, two, three, faster and hotter, drum beats so tight it seemed one continuous bang, men moving so quickly they seemed always about to fall, when someone yelled and eleven swords turned as one, pointing in. The faceless dancer was caught inside the circle of swords.

The drums stopped. The humming stopped. The faceless dancer fell.

Scandlan rose so quickly from the table he knocked his plate to the floor. He did not pause at the crash, but fled from the castle.

Rin followed.

The music started again behind her as she crossed the threshold into the yellow-hot heat of the last of the summer evenings. Scandlan stood atop a battlement overlooking the wood, his arms crossed over his chest. Soldiers approached him, but the king shooed them away.

He's a king, Rin thought. But this time she did not allow that thought to chase her away.

She climbed the steps slowly, her legs shaking as if from exhaustion. Then she stood behind him, watching quietly, and even from the simple slump of his shoulders, she understood so much about him it hurt. In some way he'd always known Selia was bad for him. But she'd been so brilliant, so tempting, a rare fresh fruit when all the world was winter. It did not matter that she had tricked him or overpowered him. Because even now that she was gone and he knew for certain just how wrong he'd been, he still missed her. He missed how she'd made him feel. His pain seemed a cousin to Rin's own defiant confusion after Wilem—her feverish yearning to feel powerful again, and her shame for that desire. She rubbed her arms as if brushing off the trails of a spider's web.

The king sat, resting his head against the battlement wall, and words swirled through Rin. So many possibilities. She knocked away most of them, ones that gave her advantage, that might woo him to admire her, even

those that could trick him into thinking well of Bayern. She could see so much pain in him, her own skin stung. It became a challenge to find the words that might have been her balm those months ago.

Don't, she warned herself. *It's dangerous. A misstep could hurt him, or worse—cause a war.* But she knew—not just what could make it feel better now, but what was true. She was not skilled enough to manipulate him as Selia had—besides, that was the last thing he needed. But the words tinkled like chimes, ready and lovely.

"Your Majesty?" Rin sat beside him. "My name is Rin. I'm . . ." *I don't know what I am. I used to be of the Forest, but I'm not anymore. I'm here, that's all.*

"You are Rin. Of where? Nowhere? That is a curious name."

She nodded agreement.

"How old are you?" he asked, squinting. His mastery of the western tongue was nearly perfect, his accent smooth.

"Fifteen. No, I had a birthday . . . sixteen."

He nodded. "You have the look of my daughter. She hates me, of course."

It was a strange thing for him to say, Rin guessed, and from that she knew that his pain was so hot that he ceased to be wary, lost the careful walls of diplomacy he must usually build. That made it easier to speak, as if they were peers comforting each other.

"My father disappeared when I was two," she said, wanting to share something in return. "Sometimes I've thought I'd give about anything just to have a memory of him."

The king nodded, wasting no words on feigned sympathy. Rin pulled her legs under her and decided she would tell a story—a true one. That is what Isi might do.

"When I was seven or eight, my ma decided that instead of spending all summer roaming the Forest and gathering food to last us through the winter, we'd start making things to sell and so buy more grain and other kinds of food we couldn't scavenge. It seemed a fine idea at the time, a way to make everything just a little nicer. We carved wooden bowls and canes and mud shoes. In the fall, my ma went to marketday in the city, sold our goods and bought a wagonload of food stuff. Once home, she discovered half the bags were nothing but chalk dust. She'd been swindled. Well, there were about twenty people in our family at the time, and chalk dust wasn't going to get us through winter. So she cried for a minute,'cause sometimes that helps us

get through the worst bits. Then she called us all in the yard and said, ‘This week we scavenge like the squirrels. I’ve got a prize for the body who brings us the most.’ And it was a game. We flowed all over that forest, hunting with slings, finding mushrooms and late berries, roots and sprouts. We had a good time—maybe even more fun than we’d had making bowls.”

The king was looking at her curiously. “Did you find enough?”

“Our bellies shrunk a bit and we chewed on pine bark till our teeth hurt, but nobody died that winter. The next spring my brother and I added water and grass to the chalk dust and patted it all over Ma’s house. It was pretty, sitting all white like that. Pretty as a bird.” The memory struck ache into her heart.

The king nodded.

“That swindler, he tricked my ma and got away with it too. But he didn’t even slow her down. It’s good to cry a bit,’cause that helps us get through the rough parts. And the winter is tough, there’s no doubt. But we just hang on until spring when that ache will be all but swallowed up.”

His eyes narrowed, and for a moment Rin feared he would yell or throw her back in the dungeon for speaking presumptuously to a king. But then his eyes softened, and his sigh was full of ache.

“You are young. You cannot understand these things.”

She was certain she was using people-speaking even before she pushed those words out, but she spoke anyway, because it was true. “A heart’s a heart, in a child or a man. You are tougher than you feel right now. Your roots are deep, your canopy’s spread wide. You’re going to show everyone what it means to be a king.”

He blinked a few times, and a tear sped down his cheek. He wiped it away. “I will show them, will I, Rin from Nowhere?”

“Yes, sire.”

“You speak boldly for fifteen years.”

“I’m sixteen now.”

He smiled just a little. “For sixteen years, then.”

She shrugged. “I’m just trying to speak truly.”

“Then speak on.”

Now it was Rin’s turn to be startled to tears. She nodded too, wiping them away and leaning back against the wall beside the king. Rin did not think he had people-speaking, but those words still entered her like arrows, and she felt stunned and downed by their command. *Speak on.*

So she did. She told more stories about home, the culture of pranks among her brothers, the games of the children. How it felt to climb a tree so high you inched about the canopy's shadow and turned your face like a leaf to the sun. How it felt to get lost inside one of Ma's hugs. How the night Forest sounded, chewed to bits by crickets and thrumming with bats and breeze.

After a time, silence fell between them, but she stayed, Rin beside the king of Kel. She let his words sprout inside her while the sun dragged the evening down into the west and the world merged with night.

Chapter 29

Rin did not approach Scandlan again but she detected a change. His eyes were still sad, his shoulders slumped as if something was reaching up for him and pulling him down by his beard. But he did not weep openly anymore, and he met Geric's and Isi's eyes when they spoke.

Speak on, he'd said. But fear crouched inside Rin, tense. What if Selia had begun like that, speaking to comfort, hoping to help? How long did Rin have before she began to act as she had with Wilem? How long before she turned into Selia?

The next evening Rin did not speak a word through dinner, sneaking out of the castle after everyone drifted off to bed. She spent the night in the wood, nestled beneath the great oak, where she could see the three stone cairns keeping their hulking vigil.

Without fear, she let her thoughts melt into the tree's core, felt that good tightness, and claimed what calm seeped into her chest. It was balm, but not healing. The timber could not take away the curse of people-speaking or even offer words of advice. She slept fitfully that night, a root arching behind her back, and dreamed that she was exhausted and could not sleep.

The next morning Rin ate a handful of hazelnuts and decided to live in Daire's wood for the rest of her life—hunt in the winter, scavenge in the summer, build herself a hut of dead wood and never speak again. The decision was still new and daunting when she heard a voice calling her name.

"There you are!" Razo strutted through the trees, his hands in his pockets. Some time ago, he'd asked Isi's thread-mistress to add pockets to all his tunics because he liked how casual he looked with his hands resting. Of course he had not told Rin that outright, but she guessed. "I've been looking all over for you, Rinty-minty-moo."

Rin could not help smiling. "Rinty-minty-moo?"

"Not my best?" Razo squinted up at the canopy, his lips mouthing the words *Rinty-minty-moo*. "Hmm. I'd been pleased with it in my head, but now I think it's safe to say that was my worst one so far. Don't worry, I'll find the perfect nickname for you yet."

He sat beside her and stared up into the gaudy patterns of the oak leaves, a quiet flinch the only sign he was remembering when those branches hid them from death.

"It occurs to me that you've been acting odd—that is, odder than normal. But being me, I didn't figure out what it was until you didn't show up for breakfast this morning—which, by the way, consisted of cherries and cheese and cold beef with jellied fat. Surprisingly tasty. Anyway, I figured it out." His tone deepened, his frown serious. "Rin, I know you're worried about hurting people. Because of, you know . . . how badly you *smell*."

Rin could not contain an angry gasp.

Razo laughed. "That was a priceless expression! Let me just absorb that for a minute in memory so I never forget . . . all right, that'll do. Anyway, I mean because of the people-speaking, of course. And you shouldn't worry." He picked up a thin stick and rubbed it between his fingers, making it spin. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone just to prove to you I'm telling the truth. There was a time when I didn't like to be home, because I felt all squished in the family, like I was just one too many Aggetkin. Like I wasn't really one of the brothers.

"Sometimes"—he winced, and the stick spun faster—"sometimes I didn't even want to be around Ma. But then I went to the city as an animal worker, met Enna and Isi and Finn, became a scout and a spy for Bayern, met Dasha, and don't know if I mentioned how I stopped a war in Tira? Did I ever tell you about that? Maybe once or twice? Anyway, I like being home now. And it wasn't the homestead that changed. So I'm saying, it's all right if you change some. Stay out in the world longer if you need it. You'll figure it out. And then you'll go home again and it'll be just right. You'll see. Besides, there's nothing Jef could use so much as a people-speaker to convince him how loud he snores."

Razo left, walking backward while he said, "We leave in the morning. Isi thinks Scandlan is suddenly better, and Enna's determined to marry Finn now or we'll all feel the pain. In the morning, Rinn-a-round. If you disappear, we'll look for you till we find you, and just imagine Enna's mood after that delay."

He turned and jogged off.

Relief bloomed in Rin's chest until it almost hurt. She did not deserve to be so relieved—she scolded herself for not feeling glum and coming up with a new plan to flee. This solved nothing. She still did not know how she

was going to live with that disease, how to keep people safe from herself. But at least, for now, she would not be alone. Her brother would not allow it.

Back at the castle, Enna declared that if it were not for Finn's mother, waiting for her only son's wedding back in Bayern, she'd have Geric marry them right there in her traveling tunic and leggings, not so much as a flower in her hair.

"But how can I break a mother's heart?" she said.

And so the party took leave of Scandlan. Formal farewells between the sovereigns lasted a good hour, and Rin waited in the wagon with Tusken, singing a song about colors. The Kelish king walked Isi and Geric to their horses, and after they mounted, he kept coming through the Bayern party and straight to the wagon. Straight to Rin.

He stared at her for several moments in silence—and so, Rin felt, did everyone else. She resisted pulling a blanket over her head.

"Rin of Nowhere," said the king. "What was the prize?"

She blinked. "The prize, Your Majesty?"

He nodded. "Your mother said there would be a prize for whoever scavenged the most before winter. Who won? What was the prize?"

"Oh!" She almost laughed, she was so startled by the question. "I don't think anyone remembered to ask about a prize. We just scavenged as if it was a game. Maybe the prize was that no one starved."

The king nodded. He smiled a little bit, just with his eyes, before turning back to the castle.

Speak on, Rin, he'd told her.

The thought was intimidating, sitting in the midst of hundreds of soldiers. It made sense to her now why she felt so uncomfortable in crowds. People-speaking gave intense meaning to words and expressions, and trying to truly see every person in a large group made her head hurt. She thought of what she'd said to Selia and felt its truth—it would be more comfortable to sit up high and command than to stay low and watch.

The wagon lurched forward and Tusken tumbled onto her lap, his noise of surprise turning into a giggle.

"Did you fall, Tusk? What a brave boy to fall and laugh!"

He laughed some more, and Rin remembered how easy it was to talk to that little boy. It was a start at least.

With no hurry (except for Enna's), Geric's party took the main trade road, checking on the rebuilding of Hendric's inn and the village of Geldis, stopping at castles in the major towns. Rin kept to herself, caring for Tusken when she was needed. Razo was often nearby.

Before Rin could come up with a plan for her future, Bayern's capital edged into view, the city's walls lining the horizon in sturdy gray. It was late morning, and Rin was riding a horse named Careful, or so Isi had called him. Tusken was sharing a horse with his father and doing something that made Geric laugh as if he too were a little boy. Enna and Dasha were trotting together, and Rin could tell they were jabbering about something silly the way their voices climbed up in pitch, though both set their jaws as if determined not to laugh.

Razo rode near Isi and Rin, trying to convince the queen that what her son really needed was to spend his summers in the Forest.

"He's got no playmates, and that's just wrong. Who'll teach him to take a punch without crying with no older brothers? I'll tell you who—Agget-kin. I've got twenty-two nieces and nephews, Isi. Twenty-two. You ever fallen face-down on an ant hill? That's what it's like to live there—but in a good way."

Rin whispered, "Actually we've got twenty-three," and Razo slapped his forehead.

"I went and forgot baby Linna again, didn't I? Don't you dare tell Jef or he'll have me changing her dirty squatters as penance. How could I forget Linna? She screams like a kestrel."

Isi smiled. "You have a Rinna and a Linna in the family?"

"Names like that are common in the Forest," said Razo. "We've got a Rinna, Linna, Winna, Minna, a Tin, Kin . . . let's see, who else?"

"Finn," said Rin.

"Right, if we're talking about Forest folk outside our family. I know a Shinn, Kinna, Vinna, Nin—I'm forgetting some—and then of course there's Enna, Genna, Senna, Hen, Gren, Lenna, Brenna . . ."

I rhyme with half of the Forest, Rin thought. She wondered if Isi's name held resonances of Kildenree, Dasha's of Tira. If it was common everywhere to resonate with your birthplace. *I belong in the Forest.*

She was not so sure it was true, but the desire for its truth burned, red coals in her chest that she did not want to die out.

“I should visit your family,” said Isi. “Meet all those *-innas* and *-ennas*, and let Tusken climb a few challenging trees.”

“Now that’s some sense,” said Razo. “I have a feeling about that boy. Soon he’ll be leaping from branch to branch like a squirrel, mastering the sling and preferring moss to pillows.”

Tusken heard Razo’s voice and shrieked for him, so Razo trotted up to the boy and his father, shouting, “There’s a dangerous brigand! I’ll teach you yet!”

Isi watched him go, then bowed her head, her gaze on her hands. Isi had been so relieved to have Tusken safe, so happy that Razo was alive, only now was Rin seeing past those brighter emotions and noticing the sadness that roiled beneath the surface. Geric wore a reminder of Selia’s cruelty on his face, but Rin supposed he was not the only one left with scars.

“You’re unsettled,” Rin said quietly. “Selia’s changed you, shaken your confidence.”

Isi did not look up. “Her words don’t go away easily.”

Unbidden, some of those words rose up inside Rin—*You were afraid of yourself all your life. And now you are useless. Weak.*

“Not everything Selia said was a lie,” said Isi. “She was right about my being a coward. I let her punishment stand, but I was too afraid to witness her execution. And since I hid and hesitated, she survived and went on to make war. How many people died due to my incompetence?”

“Selia said the Tiran were eager for war. It might have happened anyway.”

“Perhaps. But she was right—I flinch from duties. I go at being queen like a horse on a lead rope.”

Rin started with a new thought. “You don’t want to be a queen, do you?”

Isi shook her head, a little shyly. “My husband is king and I know my responsibility. I hack away at it, do my best, and hope no one notices the blunderer in the crown.”

“No.” Rin shuddered, the untruth in that so cold it chilled her. Fighting back, she gathered in warmth, let it roll around in her, ready to speak truth. “You aren’t playing at being queen, Isi. You *are* a queen. Everything you say and do and think and fear—all of it makes you a queen, and the greatest queen I could imagine.”

Isi shuddered too, as if a warm cloak were suddenly lifted off her, but she seemed lighter for it. “Thank you.” She looked at Rin curiously. “What did

Selia say about you?”

“That I’m weak.”

“She was wrong.”

Rin shook her head. She was still unsure if any of her words were harmless or if people-speaking laced them all. With the queen especially, she wanted to be cautious.

“You should know,” Isi said after a time, “it can be overwhelming to know only one speaking gift. Ever since our conversation in the woods—was it just weeks ago? Feels like years—I’ve been contemplating what gift you might learn to balance trees. But then I realized . . . perhaps you already know one.”

There it was. Rin was sitting firmly in the saddle but felt herself tumble a long way down.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” asked Isi.

Rin did not answer. Shaking her head would have been a lie.

“You were born with it, perhaps?” Isi’s voice was soft. “But maybe by the time you were old enough to understand something of what you could do, you realized it was dangerous. Maybe you often want to speak but stop yourself.” Isi waited, but Rin stayed silent. “A few times you may have used it in earnest and been frightened by what you could do.”

Rin shut her eyes against her own embarrassment. “When I’m careless, the longing begins to sweep through me again and assures me I can be anything. I can do anything. All I have to do is speak. Sometimes I believe I could become that person, and *this* me is only a shadow of who I really should be.”

“That may be true.”

Now Rin looked up. “True? But—”

“You can allow yourself to be powerful, Rin. That’s not a bad thing.”

Rin shook her head, truly wordless now.

“You saw Selia. You know what not to become. So, what will you be? I have a feeling that discovery will be an adventure to make these last weeks look like a stroll through the wood.”

They were entering the city gates, and conversation hushed with the relief of arrival and the hurrahs from the gate guards. Rin let her horse fall back and rode alone up the long, twisting streets of the capital.

What will you be, Rin?

Chapter 30

All who had journeyed were given three days' leave from duty. Most spent it sleeping, Rin and Razo included. Enna spent it planning. On the fourth day, Enna and Finn were married.

It was not a day too soon. Rumor was that the palace kitchen-master had resigned his post due to Enna's aggressive planning style, only to be cajoled back by Isi, and the thread-mistress had on three occasions faked a wakeless slumber to avoid the bride. But at last the court gathered in the great hall, lords and ladies alongside soldiers and Forest born. Pine and fir boughs entwined the pillars, filling the hall with the deliciously sweet scent of evergreen, transforming the chamber into its own forest.

Isi stood on the dais dressed in bright yellow, and with her pale skin and yellow hair, she had an inhuman beauty, like an image stamped on a gold coin. She spoke lovingly about the couple before Geric performed the ceremony. Gilsa, Finn's mother, was positioned beside the king and queen in a place of honor. She wore what were no doubt her best woolens, a bright yellow top with deep blue skirt and a red scarf in her hair, but must have shunned the idea of dressing in finery. The way she glanced at the crowd with a carefully concealed eye roll, Rin felt certain that Gilsa would not have cared if Finn and Enna had married in Kel. She was just looking forward to grandchildren.

No one stood for Enna's family on the dais—she had none. Her mother and brother had both died in the past few years. Rin wondered that she had not thought of that before. How lonely Enna surely would be, if she did not have Finn.

Enna and Finn held hands before the dais, directly on a square of sunlight cast by a window high in the ceiling. Enna wore a long red gown with Kelish lacing at the bodice, a style she fancied at the last minute. Her hair was wound together and pinned up, twining posies making a band of white across her crown. Rin barely noticed Finn's black tunic and jacket, because whenever she looked at the Forest boy, her eyes naturally traveled back to Enna again. He stared at her as if she was so stunning, so perfect, nothing else needed to exist. His gaze made Rin want to stare at Enna too and reason out her perfections. Did love make him blind to any faults until his

Enna was a lie? Or did love imbue him with a specific kind of people-speaking, so that only he in all the world saw her truly?

Rin felt a tiny crack in her heart as she realized no one would ever look at her as Finn looked at Enna. Rin must keep herself silent and apart.

Geric pronounced the final words. Finn held his hands to Enna's face, his fingertips light on her cheeks, and leaned down to kiss her. Enna blushed, a thing Rin never thought she'd see. The whole room cheered till the pine boughs swayed.

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah for the woman and the man," the crowd shouted in the traditional chant.

"It's about time," Razo muttered at Rin's side.

Dasha wiped a tear and shouted loudest of all. "Seven children, seven hearts, seven lives of happiness!"

Rin grimaced and figured it must be something they said in Tira.

"Seven cats too!" Razo shouted.

"With seven fleas!" said Rin.

Dasha bumped against Razo. "Oh stop it, you two. It is a perfectly normal wedding wish."

Rin and Razo laughed.

The crowd poured out of the palace and into the gardens, where a path lit by small white candles led to tables laden with sweet things. Razo and Dasha hooked arms and began to stroll in a manner that suggested Rin's brother had been more affected by the romance of the ceremony than he'd let on. Rin left them, making her way through plants heavy with growing, shrubs pulled low by their leaves, waiting for autumn to relieve their burdens. She felt a little autumnal herself, wearing a brownish red dress with fancy thread work around the sleeves. She patted her head, feeling the nice clean crown of braids Dasha had put in. A shrub had lost a few yellow leaves, and Rin swept them up and stuck them in her hair.

"Hello, Rin—Rinna." A boy Razo's age with a face thick with freckles stood suddenly before her, his ever-present orange cap in his hands.

Rin sighed. "Hello, Conrad."

And she kept on walking. *Not Conrad!* she thought. She glanced back. He was looking after her, twisting his cap in his hands. *Well, maybe . . . no. No. Not Conrad. Not anyone.*

The misty autumn evening welcomed her, pulling her deeper into the garden. She walked and walked, through the ordered garden, the fountains

of late roses dipping their branches into the grass. Then she saw it—the elm tree, the trunk's girth as wide as all six of her brothers wrestling in a knot. It seemed so out of place beside the garden trees and flowering shrubs, an ancient, gnarled grandfather waiting patiently for a visitor. It had changed in the few weeks Rin was gone, looking shabbier and a little unloved now, many of its leaves brown and ragged around the edges. She knew the tree did not care—autumn was part of circling time, a reason to shed and exhale, prepare for sleep. But Rin mourned the loss of its lustrous summer glory.

She guessed the elm had stood on that hill since before the castle was built. Some early king or queen must have taken a fancy to it and ordered it be spared the ax, the gardens and stables growing around it. Rin wondered if she could drown in the memories of such a thing. Just then, the thought was appealing.

She placed a slippered foot in the crevice of trunk and branch and climbed into its crossing limbs. Like diving into a deep pond with arms still at her sides, Rin lay her head against a branch, closed her eyes, and fell into the tree's thoughts. She did not leave a thread of thought behind her to hold on to, did not worry about finding her way out again. She just let herself plummet through dry, woody memories and left herself behind.

Her fears encircled her like rings in a trunk, and she existed in the core of it, spinning, facing them, seeing them—speaking a serpent's words, turning into a monster, becoming Selia, harming those she loved, spending forever alone. She spun and spun, fighting to face herself, trying not to fear so she could see her own face clearly. But she spun so quickly, the rings were a wall higher than any fortress, and she had no hands to climb. She wanted to scream at the tree, demand solace.

No, Rin. Listen.

She stopped fighting, leaned against the wall of rings, and decided to be comfortable inside confusion. As she waited, listening to the pulse of sap, what had felt hard and rough melted into softness. Walls lowered and she began to see again. It was a memory of Isi riding toward the capital, telling Rin she needed balance.

Rin looked at herself as if she were a tree, saw the circles of her tree-speaking and people-speaking growing side by side since she was a child. After she broke her own rules with Wilem, the rings of tree-speaking thinned, and the rings of people-speaking thickened, turning dark and ragged.

She turned in the elm and saw Selia, her face full of fierceness and need, slaving for her own desires, clawing her way to a crown, words leaving her mouth like cast stones.

Rin turned and saw the elm, passionless, calm, rumbling of deep soil and sunlight on leaves.

Nothing can balance people-speaking, Rin had thought.

The elm creaked in contentment, its trunk settling a little deeper into the soil.

Rin imagined herself thick with the voice of the trees, her center calm, her hands outstretched, words leaving her mouth like falling leaves. Bright autumn leaves, rich in golds and reds. She saw Scandlan, Razo, and Isi gathering her fallen words and weaving them into crowns.

The tree-speaking pulled her down and center, roots deep, content and sturdy in the soil; but people-speaking branched her up from herself and out toward sunlight—and people.

Finally she turned and saw herself, a thin, quiet girl with haunted eyes. An uprooted thing that longed to anchor herself and grow. She had been Ma's shadow, and Razo's and Isi's—but there she was now, ready to let herself be changed. She was not a queen—not Isi, and not Selia. She would be the Forest girl who listens to people the way she listens to trees and speaks truths the way leaves fall.

Rin was glowing with joy there, spinning inside the tree, weightless and without worry, whirling through images of good things, tree branches filled with people, people she loved crowned with leaves. She spun and glowed and maybe laughed until she felt ready to stand, to stretch, to look on the world with her own eyes.

And with that decision, she came crashing back and found herself sitting upright on a branch, her heart pounding, her breath coming into her lungs like blows of a hammer. She smiled, then began to giggle, throwing herself out of the tree and onto the ground. Her fancy dress was wrinkled, stuck with leaves and flecks of bark, her woven crown of braids coming loose at the ends. She felt pretty.

And new, too. Remade. Ready to move again. Listening was the start, she decided. Doing was the next step.

She patted the tree in thanks for letting her share its thoughts and come out again. By the light in the east, it was nearly morning—hopefully just the next day, she thought. Her limbs quivered with cold and exhaustion, and she

was thirsty enough that the trough near the stables looked enticing. But she could not help giggling some more as she stumbled toward the palace.

She stopped in the castle to change into her old Forest clothes and pack her few things. The waiting women were asleep, the door to Isi's chamber shut. Rin glanced once at her bed and thought longingly of rest. But her heart was pumping hard with life, and she could not bear to lie down and close her eyes again, to say good-bye to the whole world even for as long as a nap.

She meant to search out Razo, but no sooner had she left the antechamber than she bumped right into him, his upright hair matted on one side.

"You're up early," she said.

Razo swept his fingers through his hair, encouraging the tips up. "When I couldn't find you after the wedding, I bribed a few sentries to wake me if you turned up. Where were you anyway?"

"Sleeping in a tree."

He snorted. "Of course. And now . . ." He looked pointedly at her pack. "Sneaking off again?"

"I'm going home."

He exhaled. "That's all right then. Be sure to give Ma a hug from me and do something spooky to Jef—could you tell a tree to bend down and wrap its branches around him while he naps? No? Shame. But do something good, and make sure you tell me all the details when I come back. Dasha and I . . . you know, we're going back to Tira for the winter, so I won't see you till spring."

She nodded. There was a burn of sadness against her heart at the thought, but the burn did not consume her. She was Rin, Razo was her brother, and that would not change through autumns and springs.

He rubbed the top of her head. He did it fondly, but in the process pulled more hair loose from her braid, and she shoved him back before he could make a complete mess of her.

His eyes brightened with a sudden thought. "Maybe you could come with us! You'd love the boat ride, and Ingridan is . . . well, it's amazing. You'll see."

"Maybe sometime. But I can't leave Ma waiting any longer." She was not ready to explore the wide earth yet, not when home still felt mysterious. Besides, she aimed to visit the capital now and then. She might help Isi unstitch the words Selia had stuck inside her. And she could not imagine

leaving Tusken for good. But she still felt like a shadow of a girl, sitting at the feet of the fire sisters, half-formed and callow. Home was a good, safe place to learn some and grow some.

"You going to want a horse for the trip home?" Razo asked.

She looked at him without humor.

"Oh. Right. But I don't know if you should make that walk alone."

"Razo." She lifted her palms up. "I'm Forest born."

Razo nodded.

"Will you let Isi know I went home for a bit? I'm no waiting woman—she knows that, and she expects me to go. I could tell. But I'll miss that Tusken. Hug him for me? And invite them both to the homestead before winter." She spoke lightly, aware of a low heat she could draw up and pour into the words, make them stronger than what they were, but just then she found it easy to resist.

"I swear on my life." Razo gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head before turning away. She was halfway down the stairs when he called after her.

"I finally thought of the right nickname for you. What do you think about Rinna-girl?"

She smiled. "Perfect."

Rin took three days to get home. Autumn was young, breathing freshness into every gust. Instead of feeling bone-frozen and homesick for sunshine, Rin was enlivened by the weather. It made her shiver and remember that she was alive.

She took her time on the journey, listening to the pines and firs of her home. She was startled and delighted to discover how much of what she heard from the trees was just her own self echoed back. When she was filled with self-loathing for what she'd done to Wilem, that was all she heard from the trees. And in the same way, when she brimmed with sweet calm, she was not borrowing the tree's peace but actually tapping into her own. Hers was the core strong, roots running deep, branches reaching high. Hers was the radiating peace.

After realizing that, she just had to run for a while, skipping over ferns, weaving around firs. Running again, but this time toward home.

On the third day, she slowed to greet an aspen, running her hands over the papery bark and hard black knots, a contrast she found more beautiful than sunsets. She let her thoughts go in and down, listening to an aspen for the first time since she'd left home. Now she was not seeking the calm but listening for their silent green voice of life. She startled and opened her eyes. This was not an individual sapling. Every aspen in the Forest was part of the same tree. How could that be?

She touched that delicate bark again and listened. Aspen roots were part of a network that stretched over the entire Forest, thousands and tens of thousands of saplings growing up out of the same shared roots. And that root system was ancient, older than the elm, older than anything she could have imagined. Memories of fires hummed deep in its fibers, flames that had wiped out everything growing, except the aspens. Safe underground, the roots had lived to sprout new trees. Windstorms and mudslides, fires and droughts and axes, nothing had been able to kill those aspens. The tough roots survived, new trees bloomed, and the Forest kept on.

"So it is," Rin whispered.

She was not that lone elm in the garden, not some far-flung cedar clinging to a wind-battered hillside. She was from a forest as old as the stones of the earth, pines protecting each other from wind, firs entwining roots and sharing rainfall, aspens sprouting from the same source.

"Rin!" Her nephew Incher spotted her from his perch in a tree. Without another word, he leaped to the ground and ran off.

After weeks away, to have home suddenly near made her heart flutter like a trapped bird. Her first instinct was to run off, so she took a breath and found true things to speak to herself.

You are allowed to be powerful. You are not Selia, and you are not dark loathing. You have a strong core, reaching down deep, straining up high, but with eyes to see and a mouth to speak. You don't control the trees or the people. You are the changed one.

By the time she could see the bough-heavy roof of her ma's house, everyone was running toward her. All five brothers, five brothers' wives, twenty-two nieces and nephews (the twenty-third carried), and Ma, white-shot black hair frizzing free of her headscarf. There was no way Ma could outrun the likes of long-and-lean Jef or Hinna of the forever leaping legs. So perhaps she flew, because Ma did get to Rin first, her hands reaching for her girl, and then Rin was inside her mother's embrace.

It was like being lost in the rings of an ancient tree, how she seemed to be falling and yet warm and still and as secure as could be. There was no fear, no wincing away from herself. There was just Ma and Rin. And moments later, everyone. Hands slapped her back and rubbed her head, children hugged her legs, bread was stuffed into her hands and offered to her mouth, kisses and hugs and demands for news of Bayern and Razo even as others shouted all the news of the Forest.

"Rin, you're not to touch a spoon or a rag for a week at least, you hear me?" said Sari, Brun's wife. "We women have been talking about it ever since you left and not liking a bit the way things were."

"That's just so," said Jef's wife, Ulan. "We've been treating you like an old lady instead of the girl you are, and it's not right. So you just take it easy for a time till we figure out how to treat the new Rin."

"But I wanted—," Jef started.

"Not a word, Jef," said his wife. "You let her relax a time and just be. That's what she needs. I mean, is that what you need, Rinna?"

Everyone looked at her now, question in their eyes, waiting for her response, and she could see that they did want to know.

"I don't mind helping out still," said Rin, "as we figure things out."

Rin wanted to start the next day fresh and feeling like herself, whoever that was, to let home seep into her and nudge loose that scared little girl, to balance the dizziness and get her feet under her again. Part of that would be telling the truth to her nephews and finding Wilem, asking for forgiveness and trying to explain. That thought was chilly and hard, but good too in its way, because she knew it was right.

"I missed you lots," little Hinna said, rubbing her face into Rin's side.

Rin laughed. It tickled. "I missed you too, Hinna."

Ma still had her arms around Rin's neck, and she asked in her ear, "Are you staying, my girl?"

"I'm staying."

Ma sighed, her breath scented with juniper berries.

Rin checked inside herself—strong in the middle, a core that stretched from her belly to her throat, hands touching others like leaves brush leaves, body close to Ma like the roots of great trees wrapped together.

I'm Rinna-girl, she thought, *and I'm Agget-kin. I'm a tree-speaker and a people-speaker. I'm Razo's sister and Dasha's, Enna's, and Isi's friend. I'm many things, some that I don't even know yet.*

All the hands and voices pulled her into the clearing of the homestead and onto a seat by the fire. A hearty lunch stew filled bowls; laughter and excited chatter bounced off the trees. Rin was silent. She tried to read her own self as she often had others, and she saw much fault. How could her family know her when she never expressed a wish or an opinion? When she feared herself and hid behind her ma?

Slowly, carefully, she could change that. It no longer seemed a hopeless task. With her ma beside her, nieces and nephews hugging her legs, the voices of her brothers and their wives falling over her like rain, she was deluged in home. She felt so aware of her family, they seemed a part of her own body. They loved her, she knew. That was a place to start. Now it was her turn—it was time to let her family meet Rin.

The End



A conversation
with
SHANNON HALE

Shannon Hale talks about her inspirations, her writing, and her life
January 2005

Interviewer: ***You've mentioned having to read many staid books in graduate school that didn't ignite your imagination or stimulate much emotion. But, as you've noted, reading these books inspired you to write something that you would*** **want** ***to read.*** **The Goose Girl** ***is the novel that came out of that experience. What about this book appeals to you as a reader?***
Shannon: Yes, for most of my college years I read only what was assigned in class (I didn't have time for anything else!). I certainly don't mean to belittle those books or writers—most of what I read was beautifully written or historically important. But after a while, it all started to feel the same to me, and I often wasn't drawn into the story or captivated by the characters as I had been by the kind of books I loved as a kid. By my second year of graduate school, I was craving a book that created a world where I wanted to be. I longed for a rousing story that would give me reasons to turn the pages besides just completing an assignment. I wanted the writers to imbue their characters with skills and resources that would give them a fighting chance to succeed, not just doom them to bleakness and failure. Something fun. Something with hope, but not an easy, obvious happy ending (those drive me batty). Adventure. Romance. Fantasy. I love these things. As a reader, I also don't want to have to sacrifice quality writing for a compelling story.

The Goose Girl, ***as well as your other two novels*****—Enna Burning** ***and*** **Princess Academy—** ***transcend time yet are rooted in a concrete past. Why did you choose these time periods and settings?*** I wanted the settings to feel like real places, places where we've been before, places that could exist but don't. To me, it makes the story feel as though it's starting in a distant fairy tale then bursting through into reality. When you place a story in a real location, there's always the danger that a reader can dismiss the story as just being about Texas or Mexico or fourteenth-century Italy. A mythical place, an invented realm, has a universal appeal. Anyone can inhabit it—including the reader.

I do like to base the settings on real places, albeit very loosely. Like many Americans, I'm a true mutt, and I tend to use my settings to explore countries that are a part of my heritage. Bayern was partly inspired by Germany, and Danland in *Princess Academy* is a nod to my Scandinavian ancestry.

Any plans to write a contemporary story?
I've written dozens of contemporary short stories and a middle-grade novel to practice writing (all unpublished—for which blessing readers everywhere should sigh in relief). Over the past five years, I've been writing a contemporary novel for adults that I really like, though at this pace who knows when it will be finished. I find it's loads of fun to be able to make contemporary references and use

words like “hand lotion,” “yoga,” “Barbie doll,” “plumber’s bum.” Very freeing. I find it more challenging to write about a faraway land a long time ago, when all my words and references, all my metaphors, are limited to what is in the main character’s realm of experience. But I love falling into the faraway and long ago stuff, and so that’s where my imagination mostly takes me.

What is your favorite fairy tale?
“The Goose Girl” was always one of my favorites, and certainly my most favorite of the tales that have never been made into films. I was always intrigued by the story—frustrated with the princess and eager to understand more about Falada and the wind. I tend to favor fairy tales with a good douse of mystery and enchantment, the kind of story that keeps me up wondering “why?” and “how?” and “what next?”

Any other favorite tales that might inspire a future book?
Yes! But I won’t reveal them.

You’ve said that when you sat down to write* The Goose Girl*, you just wrote the story you wanted to tell and that you had no thoughts about what age you were writing for, or what genre you were writing in. Were you surprised that it’s been categorized as young adult fantasy? Did this decision affect your subsequent writing—were you more conscious of your audience when you wrote* Enna Burning*?
While writing *The Goose Girl*, I had two readers I wanted to satisfy—myself from ages ten to sixteen (the ages when reading was the most fun for me) and myself now. I wasn’t surprised that the book could be young adult, but I never imagined it would be only that. I was afraid that the “children’s book” branding would turn off some readers. I know now that many adults like me go to the YA shelf looking for the really good stuff! I had already begun *Enna Burning* when Bloomsbury Children’s bought *The Goose Girl*, so I didn’t have the YA label in mind for the all-important outlining and first draft phase.

Although I did several rounds of rewrites with my editor for both books, I was surprised and pleased that during that process she didn’t ask me to make it “younger,” except for shaving a couple of years off Ani’s and Enna’s ages. I don’t like to write about sex, gratuitous violence, or such, so I think my writing naturally seems suited for younger audiences. Truthfully, I wasn’t even aware that there were young adult publishers when I was writing these books; I supposed that most of those books trickled down from adult publishing. I’ve been delighted to learn what a vibrant, varied, voracious field it has become, especially in the last couple of decades.

You’re married and have a child. Do the events in Isi’s life—her falling in love with Geric in* The Goose Girl *and having a child in* Enna Burning*—mirror what was happening in your life as you were writing her story?
It is easy for me to write about romantic love because it’s very real in my own life. I did meet my soul mate, was his best friend for many years, fell in love, and married him just after starting to write *The Goose Girl*. I found out I was pregnant a year after I had first written about Isi’s own joyous event, but I have no doubt that my life does influence what I think my characters would want in their happily ever after. It was serendipity that both Isi and I had baby boys. I’m so happy for her. Boys are awesome.

Do you see yourself, or anyone you know, in any of your characters? I'm certain that bits of me and everyone I know make their way into my characters, though I have never consciously based a character on a real person. (Real people are so complex and very difficult to stuff into a page without their seeming erratic.) I based Isi and Enna's friendship on my friendship with my best friend of fifteen years, and I repurposed elements of my relationship with my husband for both Ani and Geric's and Enna and Finn's relationships. Miri in *Princess Academy* is burdened with more of my younger self than anyone I've ever written.

Have you noticed a change in books written today for teen and tween readers as compared to books you read as a girl?
I see more books written specifically for young adults. In fifth grade, I began to move from children's books to the adult books that had made their way to my school library shelves, but now there are so many books targeted just to older children and teens.

I think there is an increase in how much racy material is acceptable. *The Goose Girl* was actually turned down by one publisher who said the market was moving more toward "edgy" books.

I also see more female main characters (at last!). It is often a sad truth that girls will read boys but boys won't read girls, and so the majority of books for kids were about boys. When I was younger, there were no kids' TV shows or cartoons with a main girl character, and some shows had absolutely no girl characters at all! In television, this trend is changing (I love the Powerpuff Girls!) and that attitude appears to be spreading. I do see more boys accepting girls as viable heroes and it will get better, but I doubt Harry Potter would have done as well had it been Harriet Potter.

Since the publication of* The Goose Girl*, you've spent a lot of time on the road talking to readers, as well as chatting with them online through your Web site. What have you learned about yourself and your books from these exchanges?
About my books, I learn who they're for and if they succeed. Until I started to get feedback from readers, I had no idea who *The Goose Girl* would reach or what the reaction would be. After I dragged myself through the final proofing pass and read it dozens of times, I'd started to hate it. It was such a relief to hear that it had found its audience! I find this happens with each book. At the moment, *Princess Academy* is in the final editing stage and I have NO idea what people will think. I do my best to tell the story that I have, but the readers decide if it's a success.

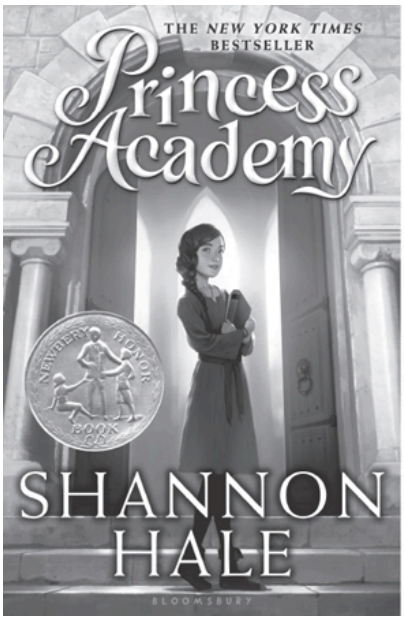
About me, I've learned that I don't personalize the (extremely minor) celebrity. The idea that someone would want my signature on anything but a bank check seems ridiculous to me. Honors and fan letters are for the books, not for me. I try to enjoy the attention sometimes just for the sake of my ten-year-old self, who would get such a kick out of it.

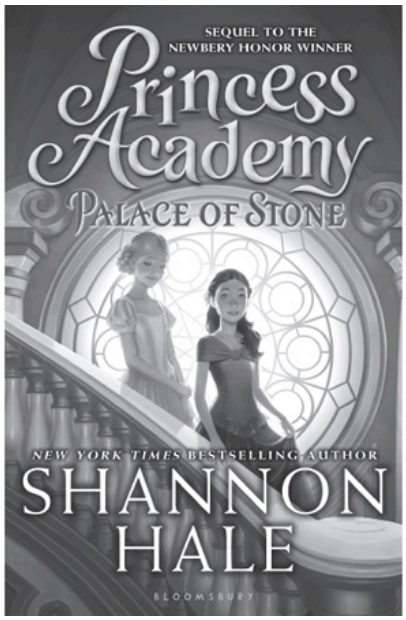
What's the worst thing anyone has said to you about your books or your writing?

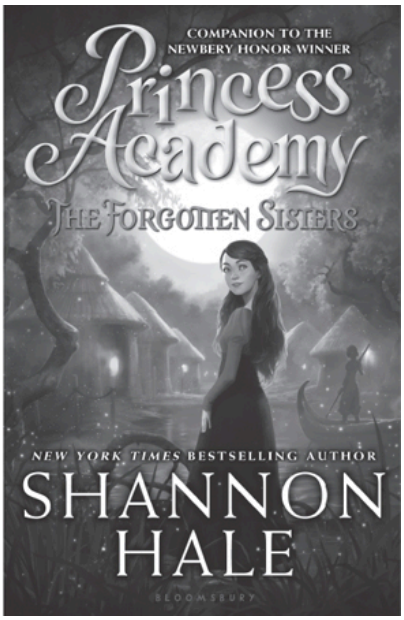
In one of the rejection letters I got for *The Goose Girl*, the editor said she found my writing "stiff, self-conscious, and cliché." Those words rang in my head for weeks. One reader, intending to be complimentary, told me she read *The Goose Girl* in an hour and a half. That book consumed two years of my life, I agonized over every word, and she burned through its 383 pages in 90 minutes. Ouch!

What's the best?
A girl wrote me that she didn't like to read until she read *The Goose Girl* and now has been reading books ever since. There's no greater compliment than that something I did made someone love to read.

Don’t miss the award-winning, *New York Times*-bestselling books in the *Princess Academy* series







★ “Hale weaves an intricate, multilayered story about families, relationships, education, and the place we call home.”
—*SLJ*, starred review, on *Princess Academy*

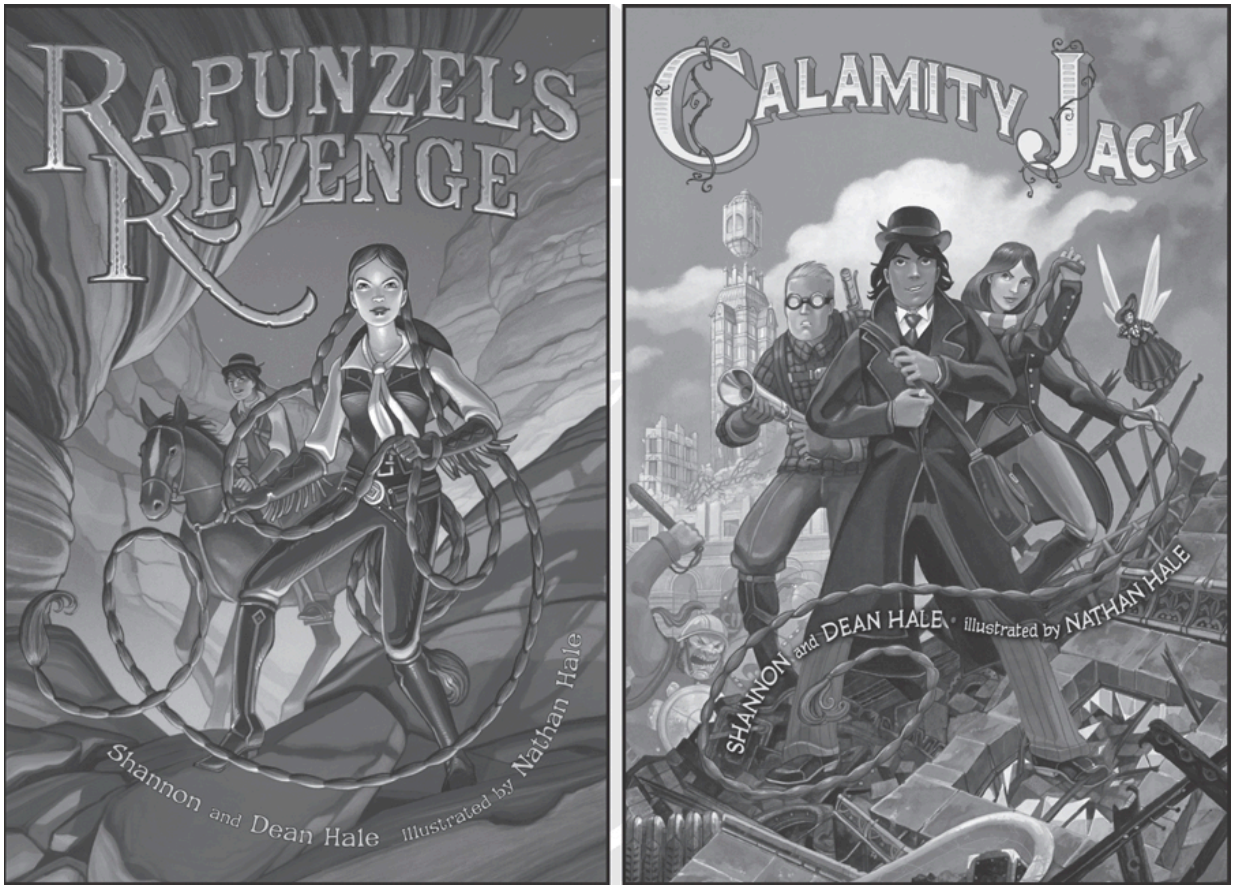
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—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review, on *Princess Academy*

“Proves once again that with quick wit and brave words, one person really can change the world.”
—*SLJ* on *Palace of Stone*

“Powerful and deeply engaging.”
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